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# Freedom, Flags, and "Never Forgetting": Commemorative Practices and Responses in the Ten Years After September 11

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**FREEDOM, FLAGS, AND "NEVER FORGETTING":  
COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICES AND RESPONSES IN THE TEN YEARS AFTER  
SEPTEMBER 11**

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Senior Thesis, American Cultures  
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Gabriel Orozco, *Island Within an Island*, 1993.

## Introduction

On December 19, 2011, several compilations of footage originally shot and broadcast by KCNA—North Korea’s sole news agency—were uploaded and spread across the video-sharing website, Youtube. It was two days after the “Supreme Leader” and dynastic ruler of North Korea, Kim Jong-Il, had reportedly died at the age of 69, after a 17-year reign. The videos depicted scores of North Koreans assembled in vast plazas in Pyongyang, the nation’s capital, seemingly weeping and prostrate with grief over the loss of their ruler. Citizens, tightly organized in rows, bowed their heads, or knelt to the ground in front of monuments to Kim Jong-Il and their country in observance of the officially declared ten-day period of mourning. Groups of two or three held North Korean flags outstretched, while others formed orderly queues to await their turn to salute the statue of their former leader. A KCNA newscaster, after announcing the ruler’s death, proclaimed it “the biggest loss for our party” and “our people and

nation's biggest sadness"<sup>1</sup> while emitting audible sobs. The state news network also ostensibly interviewed citizens participating in the public mourning—as all were required to do—quoting one woman imploring, “How can he go like this? What are we supposed to do?”<sup>2</sup> One KCNA clip shows a young woman being interviewed, tears streaming down her face: “I will change sorrow into strength and courage,” she says, “and remain faithful to respected comrade Kim Jong Un.”<sup>3</sup> Within the United States, journalists, political commentators and Youtube users were quick to proclaim the North Koreans' despair as artificial, and forced—which it was, of course, if one is purely considering the sincerity and spontaneity of the mourners' emotions. If one only considers the appearance of the spectacle, and the cooperation of its participants, the grieving is quite actual; for a nation that only caters to a “truth” that has “never been a matter of fact so much as an expression of the Kims' whim,” as the journalist Philip Gourevitch wrote in 2003,<sup>4</sup> it is the public display and representation of meaning that truly is of consequence.

This project is about the well-known tragedy of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the multitudinous gestures of mourning and remembrance that accompanied them. I begin with the recent example of North Korea's spectacles of exaggerated grief not because I think the respective magnitude and significance of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the death of Kim Jong-Il are, in any way, comparable. Nor do I believe the political, economic, and cultural conditions of the two countries can be likened in any way. The example is noteworthy, primarily, because of North Korea's

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1. “North Korea in Mourning for Kim Jong-Il,” *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2011/12/201112193620221153.html>.

2. Ibid.

3. “North Koreans Weeping Hysterically Over the Death of Kim Jong-Il,” online video (2011), video compilation, last accessed 3/1/12, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSWN6Qj98Iw>

4. Philip Gourevitch, “Letter From Korea: Alone in the Dark,” *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2003, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/09/08/030908fa\\_fact4](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/09/08/030908fa_fact4)

unapologetic demonstration that public, official “truths” need not heed more complicated historical and private realities. Underneath the country’s oppressive mandates and tightly controlled media, and beyond the perverse logic of its rulers and the ongoing “psychic and physical torture” of its population,<sup>5</sup> there is a more universal process at play, that every nation must engage with; it is the creation and reiteration of shared memory and cultural values, which, by their very nature, are governed only by their public reality.

The United States observed North Korea’s troubling grieving processes at a distance, several months earlier having just wrapped up our own commemorative ceremonies and traditions devoted to what is generally known as our nation’s greatest tragedy. September marked the tenth anniversary of the cataclysmic event, now mostly known as simply “9/11,” and the decadal milestone was perhaps more of a consummation than most Americans realize or acknowledge. Observance of the anniversary repeated many of the rituals that have occurred on September 11<sup>th</sup> of every year: candle-lit vigils, flag-waving, solemn speeches performed dutifully by political figures, and other familiar displays of sympathy and patriotic resolve. The apparent volume of these combined gestures seemed more massive this past year than in prior 9/11 anniversaries, as both the media and public sensed that the ten-year mark necessitated greater levels of emphasis and reflection. Still, the subtle feeling that the nation is approaching a new era—and one that is perhaps bound less by the political and cultural gravity of the attacks—has become stronger, and seemingly more inevitable. The United States will most likely honor the victims of the terrorist attack on every anniversary for years to come, but just as North Korea underwent a set period of mourning for its deceased leader before becoming poised to appoint a new (or somewhat

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5. Ibid.



new) leader and future, our commemorative practices for 9/11 similarly have an arc of active mourning, determined by our own preexisting conceptions of American history and tradition.

It is these ten years after 9/11 that provide the frame for my project, in which I aim to illuminate the ways that familiar symbols and practices were used in American commemorative processes in order to grant the event a shared, higher meaning and a palatable historical context. I argue that 9/11 commemorations and memorials typically rely upon pre-existing, recognizably *American* motifs and traditions to label the event an issue of immense national importance, and that the complex layering of appropriated symbols warrants closer examination. It is important to emphasize that many of these American symbols and motifs—such as our flag, or our notion of *freedom*—have been used so commonly throughout the entire history of the United States, that their usage can no longer reference their original meaning. This loss of tangible meaning implies that their contemporary usage exists more as a *process*, an exercise in patriotism and nationalist display. The implementation of such known, inextricably American themes becomes a familiar thread within the commemorative artifacts and events that I examine throughout this text.

While their formal qualities will become patently recognizable, it is important to define what precisely differentiates “commemorative” practices, objects, or artistic renderings from other interpretations and treatments of 9/11. There have been innumerable varieties of responses to 9/11, and not all can be considered commemorative. Generally, artistic explorations of internalized conceptions of the event—such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,<sup>6</sup>

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6. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

or Gerhard Richter's expressive painting of the Twin Towers, *September 7*<sup>7</sup>--should not be considered commemorative. Instead, the category of "commemoration" can be contained within the objects, images and performances that are produced with the ultimate intent of expressing pre-established, shared meanings or conceptualizations of an event or idea. This criterion guides my selection of artifacts to represent the greater aesthetic and thematic trends of memorializing 9/11, and supports the notion that commemorative practices buttress the national project of recapitulating memory and history.

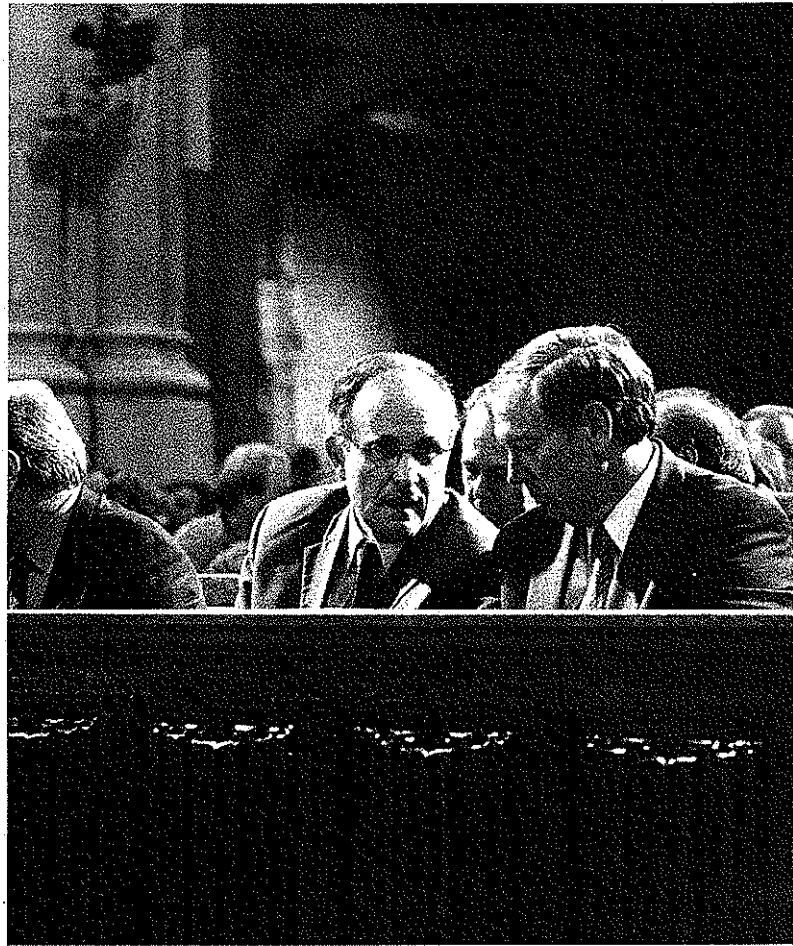
In the following chapters, I have chosen to focus on four methods of commemorating 9/11, which have generally existed in parallel in the past ten years, that I believe are both the most prevalent and the most revealing of our nation's interpretation and usage of the event. First, I focus on the American state's early management of the event, looking at the speeches, press releases and ceremonies orchestrated by the federal government and their use of a limited vocabulary of terms and gestures to convey the attacks' national and political relevance. It is necessary for this section to include an acknowledgment of media's profound role in creating spectacles and unified experiences, which I shall also explore. Following this chapter, I will overview the erection of large and small, local and remote monuments after 9/11, and their aim to unify national experience and signal collective recovery. The subsequent section will delve into more microcosmic forms of commemoration, such as adorning one's house, clothing and consumer items with American flags and purchasing other forms of commemorative kitsch. This will lead into a discussion of the ubiquitous preoccupation with the image of the Twin Towers in 9/11 tributes, and how its three

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7. Gerhard Richter, *September*, 2005. Oil on canvas. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

states—intactness, destruction, and wreckage—were embodied in separate genres of image-making. These four categories of commemorative processes dominated Americans' experiences of the 9/11 aftermath, and ideally provide a comprehensive examination of our nation's established processes of maintaining a common narrative and historical reality.

A fifth and last chapter looks at the year 2011, and its subtle suggestions of the commemorative era's closing. After years 9/11's containment within an "untouchable" realm that permitted little scrutiny or humor, public and semi-public satire and parody has gradually begun to integrate the event and its—by now—quite familiar and somewhat tired memorial processes. The trend suggests the end of the "arc," in which a historical period or cultural fixation withers into antiquity, and retires as a symbol or theme available for reference to later era. This is a natural and perhaps inevitable process for all (or most) nations, which perpetually navigate through shifting periods of thought. It is unique to modern America that these shifts can be catalyzed or proclaimed through humorous and satirical differentiation from previous trends of thought and dogma. Despite the nation's vigilant engagement with well-established, almost universal methods of constructing shared histories and ideologies, it also exhibits a contemporary bias towards critical thought, individualistic expression, and even ironic detachment, which may ultimately prevail over any singular, ideological preoccupation that may emerge. The terror and historical significance of September 11<sup>th</sup> provoked the most fervent and seemingly ubiquitous mourning period in the United States' history, but it too has been bound by a lifespan, perhaps determined by preexisting critical biases, and distaste towards singular thought, in recent American culture.



## Chapter 1

### Institutionalized Mourning, Meaning and Spectacle after 9/11

It has become primarily the obligation of the state to designate the meaning of events that in any way compromise its citizens' welfare, whether deliberately or inadvertently. War is the most severe and episodic cause of human death and suffering, and is preceded by a great float of national ideology and purpose; it is political at its core. Most societies throughout human history have become accustomed to the process of sacrificing their populations for a

prescribed mission or meaning, but more spontaneous or unplanned casualties—natural disasters, shootings, bombings, what are now identified as acts of terrorism—force this order to be reversed. The event's determined relevance to the nation must be applied after the event has occurred, and the government's lack of control or foresight is typically neutralized by prominent, ritualized gestures of recognition and sympathy, in tandem for a rampant search for an accountable party. Those afflicted by a catastrophe surely appreciate the presence and attention of government figures, and these gestures are now expected forms of validation of a community's loss or hardship. This structure has been created by the nation itself as a key to its authority; it is the author of a population's crafted narrative and the curator of its contents.

The United States, as a country that claims stubborn control of steering the global flows of commerce, military power and ideology, has made vigilant use of the process of commemoration. It is adept at projecting a poetic reality and sense of meaning over unexpected catastrophes, from natural disasters to less seasonal, more sensational bombings and shootings. This is an essential ability for a democratic society, within which the members of government—and the people they ostensibly represent—are never made to appear powerless. America's self-assigned placement at the top of the new world order creates a special obligation to compulsively place layers of higher meaning over any fissures in its banner of stability and peace. By devoting attention to select instances of tragedy and loss, it maintains the image of having tangible connections with its citizens, and thus a commitment to democratic society. After unexpected events that

produce casualties, America has shown a predilection for prompt presidential addresses and perennial memorial ceremonies; both are rigidly committed to mourning the loss of "citizens" while spouting an effluence of patriotic sentiment. The modern custom of broadcasting a state-sponsored speech or ceremony on nationwide networks has, of course, been limited to the era of radio and television; while print media could disseminate information with only a day or two's delay, the newspaper too strongly mediates between its audience and the "real event." President Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" demonstrated the imagined intimacy that a live radio broadcast could foster between a public figure and an audience, and television is an amplification of this perceived reality and unified experience.<sup>8</sup> The Internet has continued to accelerate this process of eradicating media delay; the Obama administration has attempted to mimic Roosevelt's relationship with his constituents by posting "weekly addresses," each roughly five minutes long, on Youtube and embedding them on the White House website.<sup>9</sup> President Obama's manner of speech matches the calm and colloquial tone of President Roosevelt, and he also defaults to a second-person voice. FDR held exactly 30 Fireside Chats; President Obama has recorded over 150 and counting. The president devotes each video to a different topic—gas prices, bipartisan efforts, the "national tragedy" at Fort Hood<sup>10</sup>—and every speech

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8. "Fireside Chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt," *Mid-Hudson Regional Information Center*, last accessed January 10, 2012, <http://www.mhric.org/fdr/>.

9. "Your Weekly Address," *The White House*, last accessed January 10, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/weekly-address>.

10. "Weekly Address: Tragedy at Fort Hood," Nov 6, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/weekly-address>. Concerning the shooting at Fort Hood military base in Texas the previous day, in which one gunman killed 13 people and wounded 29 others.

quickly, inevitably digresses into a promotion of American's most familiar core values. FDR's long and sporadic "chats" patiently explained issues like the implications of the Supreme Court's growing power and conditions of an impending coal crisis in detail; they are enlightening by contrast. Both presidents' sets of addresses attempted to capitalize on the latest media technologies, but President Obama's brief weekly videos reflect a new paradigm that prioritizes frequency and volume over content—a perceived need to maintain authorship over the immense volume of alternative commentary being produced and consumed online. Perhaps Obama's ritual videos can be seen in direct opposition to Osama bin Laden's contributions to the same genre. As the philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard reminds us, "terrorism would be nothing without media," and, ultimately, "media is part of the event itself."<sup>11</sup> The event is the War on Terror, an incarnation composed of the constant barrage of messages about the "good" and "bad," the virtuous and the terrorizing. Media is not only the vessel for information about this alleged war, but is the implement for waging it in each direction. Folklorist Bill Ellis believes that media's role has become "institutionaliz[ed]," and that it "magnifie[s] the impact of the terrorist attacks through intensive and repetitive broadcasting of the images," while it also "provokes and modulates the grief process."<sup>12</sup> By extension, the media also serves as the oxygen for the myriad ceremonies and memorials devoted to 9/11 after the attacks; if commemoration and the creation of public

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11. Jean Baudrillard, "L'Esprit du Terrorisme," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 2 (2002): 414.

12. Bill Ellis, "A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes," *New Directions in Folklore*, October 5, 2001. <http://www.temple.edu/english/newfolk/wtchumor.html>.

memory always implicate an audience, it now implicates media coverage as well; one gets the impression that these gestures would not happen without it.

Consequently, the news media has shaped the state's long and repetitive process of memorializing the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, day that that certainly falls into the category of events that are not preceded by a crafted meaning. Politicians expected—and were expected—to prepare prompt statements on the attack in order to provide new information and, more importantly, to designate its purpose. Exactly an hour and ten minutes after American Airlines Flight 11 hit the North Tower at the World Trade Center—the first crash of the four that day—President Bush and his staff were already aboard Air Force One, departing Sarasota, Florida where Bush had been reading to elementary students. Though its destination was unknown even after the jet was airborne, the president and his advisors were aware of their first priority; the *9/11 Commission Report* testifies that their “immediate objection was to find a safe location where the President could land and speak to the American people.”<sup>13</sup> Soon after, they had touched down at Barksdale air base, where President Bush's staff quickly set up the essential accoutrements of a presidential address—a podium, American flags, audiovisual equipment—and pre-recorded a statement. A few minutes after 1:00 pm, the statement aired on all major television news networks. It was barely over two minutes long, and focused on expressly reassuring the population of the

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13.. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (Authorized Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 325.

14. “CNN Breaking News: America Under Attack: Bush Holds Press Briefing,” *CNN.com/Transcripts*, September 11, 2001, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/010911/bn.35.html>



efficacy of their government and military. The president also did not hesitate to portray the events as, primarily, an affront to America's core ideology; his very first sentences announced, "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended."<sup>14</sup> The declaration prompted other politicians to employ the term "freedom," along with a limited selection of other familiar American "keywords," with little restraint within direct responses to 9/11, or—in the following months, and years—in subsequent speeches and campaigns. In a fiercely condemning comment published in *The New Yorker's* first issue after the terrorist attacks, Susan Sontag characterized the rampant repetition of familiar terms by accusing "public figures and TV commentators" of trying to "infantilize the public."<sup>15</sup> She summarizes the vocabulary well when she implores, "Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world?"<sup>16</sup>

Most news coverage on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and the immediate days following was devoted to relaying new information about casualties and the physical status of what quickly became known as "Ground Zero." Perhaps the government's first emotive response that was televised—and therefore witnessed on a national level—was the news bite of members of Congress singing "God Bless America" while gathered on the steps of the Capitol on the evening of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The members of the Senate and the House of Representatives had collected in a "symbolic display of unity" and, after a moment of silence,

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15. Susan Sontag, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta\\_talk\\_wtc](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta_talk_wtc).

16. Ibid.

commenced an “apparently spontaneous chorus”<sup>17</sup> of the ballad. It is futile to attempt to assess the authenticity of the spectacle; however, it is crucial to acknowledge how the perception of spontaneity and sudden inspiration can identify an event as a catalyst of a new era. It is a trope that is reminiscent of old Biblical religious legends and modern fables alike, in which a protagonist suddenly receives inspiration from an alien source—divine or otherwise—and becomes equipped to usher in salvation. Congress ostensibly dismissed their partisan differences and, in unison, broke out into celebration of a new, post-9/11 era of unity and divine privilege. On several annual anniversaries of 9/11, members of the House and Senate that were present at the Capitol congregated on the same steps to reenact the first ceremony, commemorating what was perhaps the first televised commemoration of the attacks (Fig. 1).

Members of Congress did not produce any further spectacles of patriotic resolve in the year after the attacks, but the singular rhetoric expressed by President Bush and other political figures continued to shape the essential “meaning” of the event. These speeches collectively identified the day as a moment of profound change for the nation, shying away from historical context and instead reliably reiterating America’s commitment to *democracy* and *freedom* and bringing *justice* to—as Giuliani called the members of Al Qaeda in his first press conference after the attacks—“barbarians.”<sup>18</sup> Political successors have

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17. Jonathan Karl, “Congress Vows Unity, Reprisal for Attacks,” *CNN U.S.*, Sept 11 2001, [http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-11/us/congress.terrorism\\_1\\_attacks-world-trade-center-cowardly-acts/2?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-11/us/congress.terrorism_1_attacks-world-trade-center-cowardly-acts/2?_s=PM:US)

18. *World Trade Center and Pentagon Bombings*, Video content (2001: New York City; CNN News), online video.



Fig. 1. On September 11, 2011, Congress members sing God Bless America in a reenactment of their spontaneous rendition on the same date ten years earlier. Photograph by J. Scott Applewhite/The Associated Press.

continued dutiful observance on each anniversary, never deviating far from patriotic sentiment, and yet reliably fixating on the nearly 3,000 casualties—though they are never referred to as such. Once the dust had—figuratively and literally—settled from the sites of the plane crashes, and missing persons lists turned into a death toll, the proclaimed moment of crisis shifted into a steady state of prolonged remembrance. All messages were subsequently devoted to commemorating the event, and all focused first on honoring the dead, expanding only slightly on the 9/11 lexicon. Acknowledging victims is a natural and understandable gesture, but through its careful combination with key, patriotic terms, it is a device that political figures have used to deepen our sense that these fatalities were wrung for national causes. Casualties of the disaster are most commonly referred to as “victims” of a malicious attack or “heroes” immersed in a patriotic struggle. As Robert Storr wrote in a combined essay on Gerard Richter’s painting *September* and on his own conceptualization of 9/11, “In the search for meaning in death, love of country historically takes precedence over other considerations once it enters into discussion,” adding that “[this] process has moved commemoration of the victims of the WTC attack to the brink of making innocent civilians...into the first front-line casualties in a national battle for survival.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in their frequent tributes to the 9/11 event, President Bush, President Obama, and the many other state and federal officers frequently elevated all of the killed individuals to the status of the “hero.” In his comprehensive text, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, David Simpson

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19. Robert Storr, *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 29.

contends that most “commemorative language” is built upon the construal of the casualties as “icons of patriotic life, above all saturated with meaning,” and therefore both worthy of the nation’s continuous attention and, at the time of the attacks, “worthy of sacrifice.”<sup>20</sup> The remarkable potency of this language is responsible for transforming the incident into one that fits cleanly within America’s trajectory, rather than letting it linger in the impression of chaos and oblivion. Indeed, the vigilant acts of commemoration that have annually flooded the public sphere have already supplanted the force of the original event, so that our knowledge of subsequent construals—the memory of our acts of remembering, even—have become the most accessible, and the most actual.

It was only a few months after the event that is now colloquially referred to as simply “9/11” evolved from an active crisis into a past moment, and one that was acclaimed worthy of eternal reflection. Political speeches still routinely invoked the attacks as a backing for new or proposed state initiatives, but the government’s influence also quickly extended into the realm of erecting a template for public 9/11 ceremonies. Various methods of memorializing the event were produced in a variety of public and private spheres (and will be elaborated on later) but ceremonies into which the state inserted itself rigidly upheld a particular genre. These ceremonies, which have been performed with diligent respect to each 9/11 anniversary throughout the country, typically replicate the traditions of familiar military ceremony, and their structure is ultimately devoted to sanctifying the state. Exactly one month after the attacks,

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20. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 51.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and President Bush hosted a service at the Pentagon to implicitly signal the end of what CNN identified as a requisite “30-day mourning period for the victims of the attack.”<sup>21</sup> The ceremony was of considerable magnitude, attracting an audience of roughly 20,000 guests, and featured statements from Bush, Rumsfeld and other military personnel. The program was a regimented succession of speeches, interrupted by orchestra performances of familiar American ballads. The audience phlegmatically listened and saluted when instructed. The decision to hold the large memorial—another smaller one was held on the same day at Ground Zero—was likely practical, given the condition of New York City, but the Pentagon event, with its heavy military presence, its vast, orderly crowd, and numerous solemn solutes to the nation cemented the impression that 9/11 was primarily an affront to the state and to the military. Later that month, the House of Representatives unanimously approved a resolution to designate September 11<sup>th</sup> of every year “Patriot Day,” and President Bush signed it into law in December. The mandate requests that on the day, all American flags must be flown at half-mast and that a moment of silence be conducted on the minute the first World Trade Center tower was hit. No other national holidays have been formed so promptly. There is little doubt that the government enacted traditions and spectacles of remembrance for political gain—being equipped to justify the War on Terror and a number of new measures within our borders (The Patriot Act, notably) was one benefit of this

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21. “Bush, Rumsfeld speak at 9/11 memorial,” *CNN U.S.*, Oct 11, 2001, [http://articles.cnn.com/2001-10-11/us/rec.pentagon.memorial\\_1\\_pentagon-memorial-pentagon-attack-defense-secretary-donald?s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2001-10-11/us/rec.pentagon.memorial_1_pentagon-memorial-pentagon-attack-defense-secretary-donald?s=PM:US).

process. On a larger level, they serve to refresh the American narrative of innocence and patriotic devotion, while signaling that the country has fully recovered and remains functioning as a global power. It is the deliberate repetition of certain words and sentiments, coupled with the ritualized ceremonies and flag-waving that, Simpson points out, fosters “normalization,” which is “precisely one of the most effective ways in which culture is remade.”<sup>22</sup>

Since the declaration of “Patriot Day” and the first assembly at the Pentagon, which ostensibly launched the commemorative era, communities in the United States have dutifully performed moments of silence and other open ceremonies on each anniversary. On the one-year anniversary of the attacks, Highland bagpipers led a procession in New York City that inaugurated a full day of ceremonies and events, referencing a longstanding American tradition that itself references an even older, foreign one. Bagpipes have been used frequently in subsequent state-sponsored 9/11 remembrances, along with a limited assortment of other rituals: memorial site inaugurations, honor guards, and flag ceremonies. The simplistic and reverent qualities of these performances—as it is appropriate to call them—conveyed an ultimate commitment to sanctifying 9/11 and expressing our veneration. With specific regard to moments of silence, which embody the spirit of this genre of commemoration, Simpson’s application of *concentration* to commemorative culture elaborates on how these aesthetic rituals work to assign transcendent value to an object or idea. Simpson draws upon Walter Benjamin’s notion of “contemplative immersion,” which Benjamin

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22. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 17.

contends has become the expected method of art consumption.<sup>23</sup> Aesthetic experience must produce a state of full absorption, and therefore a departure from the ordinary—one that only designated groups can achieve. Within the art world, it is only those that have the literacy to extract designated meanings; with moments of silence devoted to a sublime memory, it is only those that have privilege to the original experience. As Simpson claims, this perception of exclusivity aids the fetishization of the “object” and the creation of a new “spiritual identity” for the participants.<sup>24</sup> Quiet contemplation about the *moment* of 9/11 hence becomes an exercise in reinforcing the holiness of Americans’ enlightened—and private—experience, which in turn reinforces the dogmatic authority of the state.

The perceived experience of sharing an exclusive, sublime idea, which is at the heart of Simpson’s application of *contemplative immersion*, remains the primary function of moments of silence and other ceremonies. Simpson sees the production of concentration as central aims of memorial sites and monuments; it is also central to most commemorative projects, which by definition work to aestheticize a shared memory. This will be revisited later. A concept that Simpson’s use of *contemplative immersion* does not consider is the ritualized nature of most state-sponsored or public ceremonies, such as Patriot Day’s instatement of annual moments of silence and New York City’s “Reading of the Names,” a ceremony devoted to reading out the names of those who died as a result of the

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23. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 39.

24. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 69.



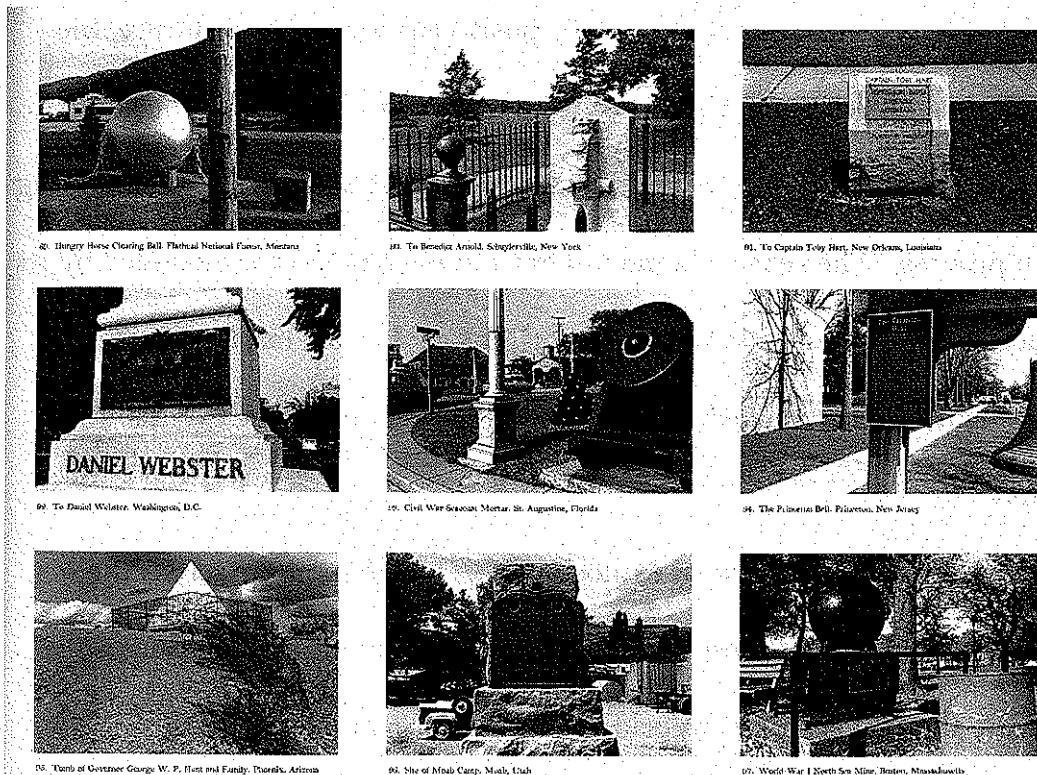
attacks, which has been performed each year on September 11<sup>th</sup> since 2001.<sup>25</sup>

*Contemplative immersion* may be the desired effect of a memorial ritual in its original experience, but revisiting the ceremony at designated intervals relegates the original “moment” of 9/11 to a secondary status. Performing the ritual becomes primarily recognition of its own existence and usage, a self-referential spectacle that, as Guy Debord would suggest, indicates that “that which appears is good, that which is good appears.”<sup>26</sup> The diligence and organization with which a ceremony is performed becomes its meter of effectiveness and therefore an indication of its participants’ devotion; the commitment to process undermines any need for actual contemplation or subjective recollection of the event. In the case of the actual “event” of 9/11, which is still ostensibly articulated through conducted moments of silence upon the precise moments the planes hit the two towers, the historical complexity and incomprehensibility of the attacks was subsumed by the state’s readiness to impose order and to sanctify events that were beyond its control. The perennial use of ceremonies that emphasize public unity and private reverence are processes of active civil restructuring that lead with the power of spectacle, aided of course by redundant political speeches and media coverage. With the finesse of a country that is intensely familiar with the processes and uses of commemoration, the United States government swiftly conjured a post-9/11 era only weeks after the attacks and implanted a new dogmatic system of belief and memory.

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25. Robert D. McFadden, “On 9/11, Vows of Remembrance,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2001, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/nyregion/september-11-anniversary.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/12/nyregion/september-11-anniversary.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

26. Guy Debord, “Thesis 12,” *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).



Plates 89-97 of Lee Friedlander's monograph, *The American Monument* (New York: Eakins Press, 1976).

## Chapter 2

### Monuments, Cenotaphs, and the Rebuild at Ground Zero

If public, ritualized ceremonies work to recall the ideological and political connotations of a particular event, public monuments function to install them as permanent fixtures of a new cultural landscape. The tradition of erecting memorial sites undoubtedly has its origins in ceremonial burial, a human tendency that reaches back hundreds of thousands of years to our Neanderthal ancestors, and ultimately signifies a reluctant attitude towards death and its ability to negate our existence. From this compulsion comes the symbolic project of monuments, which seek to immortalize a former entity by acknowledging its

former being while providing an effective replacement. Though both work towards signifying permanent change and a positivist vision for the future, the monument's dual objectives to signal recovery and respect the endurance of tragedy creates a complex code of representation and a heavily weighted building and design process. The sense of a monument's importance is compounded by its permanence and its singularity; from their origins as the sole marker of a grave, most monuments are designated as the essential expression of the event's significance.

With this in mind, the rapid explosion of 9/11 monuments across the country seems like a strange reaction to the event, when our imaginations so quickly locate the attacks to the World Trade Center complex. But the appearance of commemorative gardens, statues, benches, and other installations in over 30 states—and foreign, yet predictable locations like Israel and China—demonstrates the degree to which the attacks were viewed as an affront to the entire country. The nationalist imperative that bled from the government's response produced a newfound desire for the country to cohere; our identities as members of smaller communities needed to be applied to the new national project. Consequently, the creation of community memorials to the attacks becomes another process of exercising patriotic identities and national unity. In April of 2003, a *Los Angeles Times* article counted more than 250 public memorials to the dead,<sup>27</sup> another inventory of memorials across the country have

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27. Cara Mia DiMassa, "Soothing Suffering with Steel: Remnants of New York's Twin Towers are Reborn as Monuments Across the U.S," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/02/local/me-debris2/2>.

listed 282 and is outdated.<sup>28</sup> The recurrent feature of these monuments is the central display of a piece of steel, retrieved from the wreckage of the twin towers. The Los Angeles Times article mentions this trend and notes that the “steel remnants” were in fact knowingly removed from the site by New York’s Office of Community Management and “set aside” for this very purpose.<sup>29</sup> Prompted by an inundation of letters and phone calls, the office instructed workers to set aside steel beams and girders and cut them into appropriate sizes for memorials; they produced “several hundred” monument-ready pieces, all of which were claimed by the end of 2002. The article also reports the story of Father Andrew Harrison, who drove from Palo Hills, Illinois to New York City and back to retrieve a two-foot segment of beam from the World Trade Center site, which he “carefully draped with an American flag” and brought to his church, where it was installed in the narthex and decorated with eternally-lit candles.<sup>30</sup> It is one among many accounts of people’s pilgrimages to Ground Zero that the media has featured; they are popular because of their similarity to Christian parables, though they still safely operate as secular projects of loyal citizens. Father Harrison’s tale is less subtle, however, in its unabashed synthesis of patriotic expression and religious faith. It is joined by similar reports of steel beams being used to rebuild a bell tower of a Roman-Catholic church, and of churches otherwise functioning as central organizers and locations of commemorative projects despite claiming

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28. “List of 9/11 Memorials,” *9/11Memorials.org*, April 21, 2010, <http://911memorials.org/?p=1>.

29. Cara Mia DiMassa, “Soothing Suffering with Steel: Remnants of New York’s Twin Towers are Reborn as Monuments Across the U.S.,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/02/local/me-debris2/2>.

30. Ibid.

their involvement is non-denominational.<sup>31</sup> All of these anecdotes seem to celebrate the reunion of church and state, implying that 9/11 was exceptional, holy, and transcendent of ordinary law. Compounded by post-9/11 racism and infringements on civil liberties, the reintegration of church and state suggests that these boundaries (produced largely by allegedly unpatriotic liberal progressives) are primarily theoretical and un-American at their core. Though it is hardly the only commemorative domain to invoke religion after 9/11, the creation of monuments that draw largely upon Christian allegory impose a sense of permanence upon this new era of exception.

However, not all community monuments erected in the memory of September 11<sup>th</sup> hold religious connotations. Many are designed to be secular representations of loss, and typically consist of simple stone sculptures set within a small garden or designated public and open space. "Eternal flames," American flags, fountains, and benches—gentle encouragements towards quiet contemplation or *contemplative immersion*, perhaps—are common additions, as are engraved names of the dead, particularly if members of the community died in one of the attacks. New Jersey has the most, and among the most ambitious, monuments of any state; with 100 public and official memorials, there is one for almost every seven New Jersey residents who died in the attacks. The state's largest and perhaps most well-known cenotaph is *Empty Sky* in Jersey City's Liberty State Park, which lists all the names of the state's 9/11-related casualties

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31. "America unites to honour 9/11 dead; September 11 - The day the world changed In churches and museums, schools and community halls, people vow victims will never be forgotten." *Western Daily Press* (England, UK), Sept 11, 2002.

on two long, thin walls that run closely parallel to each other.<sup>32</sup> It bears an unmistakable likeness to both the Vietnam War memorial in Washington D.C. and Richard Serra's World War II memorial, *Berlin Junction*, which honors the victims of the Nazis' "Aktion T4" program with two long pieces of steel, standing on their thin edges in a similar configuration. Monuments in less proximal states, though diverse in their specific formal attributes, also seem bounded by a limited vocabulary of shapes and concepts. To critique or condemn the supposed effectiveness of these small memorials is beside the point, and encourages the belief that American communities must adhere to a specific, post-9/11 doctrine and set of expectations. However, it is important to acknowledge that their consistent similarity to the countless other memorials that populate every town square and public park conflicts with their assertion that 9/11 was truly an event that cannot be compared with other wars and tragedies. The Civil War and the World Wars, as Baudrillard remarks, "correspond to the classical image of war,"<sup>33</sup> and therefore are commonly represented by small variations on the theme of stone cenotaphs, bronze statues and polite fountains. The genre, of course, was adapted from burial stones and still remains the most practical and economical; if mourning the dead is the only qualifier, then 9/11 certainly fits under this category. But the event hardly resembled normal warfare, and has been proclaimed the "day that changed the world" and one of paramount

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32. "9/11 Empty Sky Memorial Unveiled in NJ Park," *NBC New York*, September 7, 2011, <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Empty-Sky-September-11-Memorial-Liberty-State-Park-129422688.html>.

33. Jean Baudrillard, "L'esprit du Terrorisme," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 2 (2002): 406.

importance to America. The rampant use of common motifs and modest commemorative benches, therefore, are poised between the desire to solidify a new, post-9/11 nationalist commitment and relegate the incident to the safe bowels of our manageable military history.

At Ground Zero, plans for the new Freedom Tower and the National September 11 Memorial placed much more emphasis on triumphant display and perfect symbolism. Restoring the former World Trade Center complex to some form of deliberate function, whether commemorative or commercial, quickly became “tantamount to showing the flag, [and] sending a message to the world that American endurance is alive and well,” as the *Washington Times* wrote just ten days after the attacks.<sup>34</sup> Aside from following through on promises to avenge the attacks and “exterminate evil,” rebuilding at Ground Zero became the greatest symbolic rebuttal to Al-Qaeda and the imagined multitude of America-haters. Compounding the importance of the rebuild was the perceived spiritual importance of the site; the wreckage at the World Trade Center complex was quickly designated “sacred” or “holy ground,” terms that likely originated within statements by President Bush, Governor of New York George Pataki and New York City Rudolph Giuliani, and subsequently echoed by the media. A born-again Christian firefighter’s discovery of a “cross” (Fig. 2)—a steel remnant that was severed into the shape—standing upright amidst other rubble was heralded as a

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34. “Ideas abound to replace twin towers; Debate is on new buildings, park, memorial at lower Manhattan location.” *The Washington Times* (Washington, DC), Sept 21, 2001.

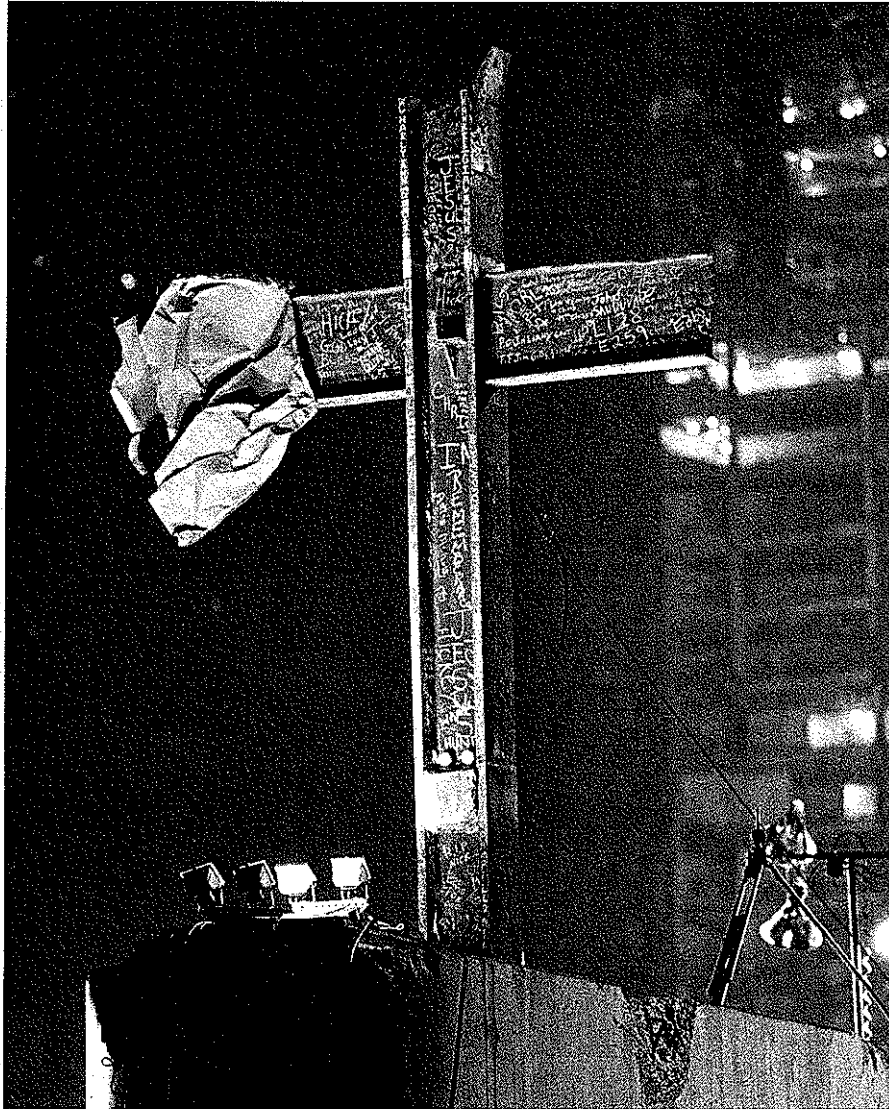


Fig. 2. A photograph by John Bott shows the steel-beam cross found at Ground Zero, illuminated and covered with inscriptions written by visitors to the site. From John Bott's monograph, *Aftermath: Unseen 9/11 Photos by a New York City Cop* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006).



miracle and prompted a visit from a Vatican representative, who sent a photograph to the pope.<sup>35</sup> The cross has remained a holy artifact and is now installed at the 9/11 memorial, despite a barrage of criticism from advocates of church-state separation and a lawsuit brought by the American Atheists. The disputes solidified the perception that the new memorial was primarily obligated to represent the spiritual connotations of the event, and was also capable of conveying the religious makeup of the entire country. It became immediately clear that whatever was constructed at Ground Zero needed to make permanent the spiritual power of the site, for fear that the collective power of our individual minds might erode our new national enlightenment.

Extra weight was added to the significance of the Ground Zero rebuild by conflicting ideas about what the memorial should consist of, and what type of civic function was most appropriate. Early debates centered on whether the site should be rebuilt into a destination of architectural and commercial splendor, or whether a function-free site of solemn remembrance would be more appropriate. Ultimately, the future site's dilemma was an ontological one, caused by its location at the intersection of historical significance and of cultural and economic potency. As David Simpson writes, the memorial "remain[ed] under pressure to embody both commemoration and rehabilitation, each of which inevitably to some degree undermines the other."<sup>36</sup> In his essay "In New York," Hal Foster also pondered, "Can mercantile New York be crossed with mausoleal

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35. *The New York Post*, "Holy symbols of hope amid the rubble" (New York, NY), Sept 23 2001.

36. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 61.

Washington, say, or the World Trade Center turned into the World Trauma Center?"<sup>37</sup> What emerged was a tense dialectic between a monument's obligation to exist as a *positive*, physical entity and a *negative* signification of loss or the past. In this particular situation, and more commonly with newer interpretations of what a memorial can consist of, there is also struggle between whether monuments must, at their core, remain representational. In her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" art critic Rosalind Krauss equates "the logic of the monument" to that of sculpture, which she calls a "historically bounded category" and confined to its "own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change."<sup>38</sup> The monument's primary function, she argues, is as a "commemorative representation" since it "sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place."<sup>39</sup> Representation via monument is illustrated explicitly by the use of podiums, explanatory plaques or depiction of an event or figure; in certain circumstances it is also required to become highly abstract or an acknowledged superimposition upon what already exists. If the symbolic power of an event is already retained by a specific location or moment in time, other modes of commemoration become inept or secondary. Such is the dilemma of 9/11 and the national memorial; Ground Zero and the wreckage of the Twin Towers were already made to hold the entire meaning of the attacks, and its corresponding on-site memorial was obligated to either reinforce and

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37. Hal Foster, "In New York," *London Review of Books* 25, no. 6 (2003), p. 16.

38. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002), 38.

39. Ibid.

preserve its post-9/11 state (a negation in itself) or create a new functional structure that would inevitably eclipse it. City planners, politicians, architects, and everyone involved in the memorial planning were forced to negotiate the troubling implications of either preserving the image of a weakened nation-state, or risk offending Americans with a disregard for a catastrophic event. The monuments that now comprise the National 9/11 Memorial appear to have made concerted effort to accommodate both interests, while ultimately expressing America's superiority with structures that sport unsurpassed statistics of height and magnitude. The Freedom Tower and the pools, collectively named *Reflecting Absence*, are the main features of the National 9/11 Memorial, which was dedicated on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks despite the tower's projected completion in 2013. As their evocative names suggest, the tower and pools represent their opposing obligations to colossal extensions; the two 1-acre wide pools have become the United States' largest man-made waterfalls, and the Freedom Tower, with its planned height at a very deliberate 1,776 feet, will set a new American record for the tallest building—and will be the third tallest in the world.

*Reflecting Absence*, designed by architect Michael Arad and landscape designer Peter Walker, closely adheres to the monument's role as negative representation of loss and things past. Located precisely on the original sites of the Twin Towers, each consists of a square, acre-wide indentation into the ground. Small, parallel streams of water emerge at ground level and follow the walls of the pool down to the floor, 30 feet below. The pools are reminiscent of

the artist Michael Heizer's *North, South, East, West*, which consists of four 20-foot deep, geometrical holes that were dug into the ground in Sierra Nevada, California, and lined with sheet metal (Fig. 3).<sup>40</sup> The work is an exploration of the margins between altering a specific location and erecting a man-made entity; Krauss contends that the work and others like it have forged a new sculptural category between landscape and architecture, which she calls *site construction* (p. 40). Landscape is natural, unaltered, and *fixed*, and it functions as the *negative* in the same way that Ground Zero has remained an emphasized location in *Reflecting Absence*. Conversely, architecture remains *positive* and distinctly-man made; as Baudrillard has remarked, it "expresses, signifies, [and] translates a kind of full, constructed form...part of the fiction of a society, an anticipatory illusion."<sup>41</sup> It has the capacity to display evidence of human manipulation, to create a singular, *named* entity onto which we can focus our attention. When used in a memorial project, its deliberate artificiality is also implemented to convey a sense of agency and recovery on behalf of the victim—which is, in this case, purportedly the state. The two angular, perfected pools of *Reflecting Absence* certainly projects the impression of its being "built"—by famous professionals who competed with thousands for the commission, no less—as a permanent and immovable reclamation of the event. However, the two pools, along with other components of the new memorial, also pay homage to the natural "landscape" that preexisted the attacks. Though the pools are articulated feats of engineering

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40. Michael Heizer, *North, South, East, West*, 1967/2002 (Dia Art Foundation, Beacon, NY), <http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/main/83>.

41. Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, "First Interview," *The Singular Objects of Architecture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 5.

and artistic ingenuity, they fundamentally operate as voids that reference the disappearance of a former entity. Additionally, the enormous slurry wall, which was originally built to hold back the Hudson River as the deep foundation for the towers was being built, still stands on the perimeter of the memorial's site, remaining as a tribute to the pre-existent—and therefore *natural*—terrain that has since been demolished by forces of terror and evil. An early design of the memorial, proposed by star-architect Daniel Libeskind, included portions of exposed bedrock 70 feet below ground level;<sup>42</sup> human remains retrieved from the wreckage of the Twin Towers—mostly “bone fragments but also tissue that has been dehydrated for preservation,” as the New York Times described—were planned to be displayed in the National 9/11 Memorial Museum, until victims’ families protested and plans were withdrawn.<sup>43</sup> These designs revealed a curiosity with relics of a past that is certainly owed preservation, but the dismissal of these ideas proves that such proximity to the event—and to the *present* remainder of suffering and absence—remains too vivid, and too unpalatable. The commemorative purpose of the memorial is largely to exorcise the monstrosity of events from our private memories and relegate it to a specific physical space and moment in time. Appropriate distance from horrific reality, with access to a pure history and a reliable future were also crucial. As with other commemorative practices related to 9/11, it is the National Memorial’s duty to

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42. Robin Pogrebin, “Architecture: The Incredible Shrinking Daniel Libeskind,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 20, 2004. Daniel Libeskind won an early competition to design the entire memorial; for unspecified reasons the assignment was handed to Michael Arad and Peter Walker for the memorial, and David Childs of Skidmore, Owing and Merrill for the tower. Libeskind has been granted the role of Master Planner despite limited involvement.

43. Anemona Hartocollis, “For 9/11 Museum, Dispute Over Victims’ Remains,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr 1, 2011.

produce new meaning and visions of a fresh era, which can apparently only be accomplished through a delicate equilibrium of past and future—never present—and between the use of pure, reverent emptiness and constructed entity. The memorial has achieved a stirring synthesis of these opposing needs through an appropriation of landscape and architectural practices. Rosalind Krauss identifies this pattern of forging new categories between existing constructs, and situates it within the post-modern; she contends that “within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium...but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium might be used.”<sup>44</sup> The National 9/11 Memorial had much greater pressure put upon it than the hundreds of smaller monuments scattered across the country, which were polite and comforting gestures at their core. The new World Trade Center complex could not be as familiar or as empty of direct representation; instead, it was obligated to generate a new geography that could not exist within the traditional bounds of pre-9/11 existence.

Ultimately, the most prominent and symbolically weighted structure on the 8-acre National 9/11 Memorial complex is One World Trade Center, the new tower that has been colloquially dubbed the “Freedom Tower.” Though *Reflecting Absence* and the surrounding expanse of trees, plaques and granite has been granted the task of memorializing 9/11 with equal gestures towards memory and recovery, One World Trade Center is perceived as the nation’s

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<sup>44</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002), 46.

central rebuttal to the terrorist attacks. This is indubitably a result of the universal fixation on the Twin Towers' collapse; Baudrillard claims their destruction served the "strongest symbolic shock"<sup>45</sup> to near and far spectators, and related images and videos remain the dominant representation of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. As the tenth anniversary arrived and physical and psychic recovery seemed near absolute, our collective imagination became thirsty for a replacement image—one that was grounded in tangible reality, and related to a triumphant feat. The incessant repetition of the former towers burning needed to be matched by an even more singular entity, which has an obligation to be saturated with even more meaning. "Whatever replaces [the Twin Towers]," David Simpson wrote in 2006, "can hardly avoid sinking into a morass of signification of the most contrived and hortatory kind."<sup>46</sup> It is no surprise that the most effective replacement of a horrific American memory must be a "more strident call for triumphalism," Simpson continues, "[and] an economic and patriotic display of national and local energy that can pass muster as embodying the spirit of America."<sup>47</sup> Thus, a gleaming, single tower is in the process of being erected, with a mirrored exterior that seems to deflect any inklings of future threat, and any possible criticism of America's Icarian compulsions. Hal Foster condenses the requests of Americans to a single demand: "*Build them higher than before*," he emulates, adding, "as if the problem were penile dysfunction—and,

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45. Jean Baudrillard, "L'esprit du Terrorisme," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 2 (2002): 405.

46. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 61.

47. Ibid.

perhaps, imperially speaking, it is.”<sup>48</sup> The monstrous obelisk that is now being built purportedly celebrates “global democracy and global freedom,” as the initial architect Daniel Libeskind claimed,<sup>49</sup> meant to be looked upon and admired by the world population. Ironically, it will also obscure floors upon floors of office workers, quietly occupying their roles within the capitalist networks of an international force—just as their predecessors in the Twin Towers were also doing on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. That is, if the offices even become filled; Hal Foster remarked, skeptically, “lower Manhattan hardly needs 10 million more square feet of office space at a time when 14 million sit empty.” He also remained dubious of other commerce-driven developments, maintaining that “it is not clear if people will return to lofty restaurants and observation decks, let alone rent offices and retail space.”<sup>50</sup> The assorted proposals for the commercial functions of the tower were introduced in tandem with fantasies of symbolic achievement and national triumph, which were equal in number, yet much more restrained by America’s limited vocabulary of patriotic celebration. Because of their integration into the larger fantasy of the rebuild, the plans for restaurants, shops, and miscellaneous mercantile destinations within and around the tower become part of the spectacle of renewal—not only devoted to the American spirit, but also to a fresh, rebranded urbanism. The Freedom Tower (Fig. 3) is perhaps most invigorating for its perceived, cenotaphic ability to shut the lid on a decade-long era of mourning and readjustment, and has thus been meticulously designed and

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48. Hal Foster, “In New York,” *London Review of Books* 25, no. 6 (2003), p. 13.

49. Daniel Libeskind, *Breaking Ground* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), as quoted in David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 70.

50. Hal Foster, “In New York,” *London Review of Books* 25, no. 6 (2003), 17.





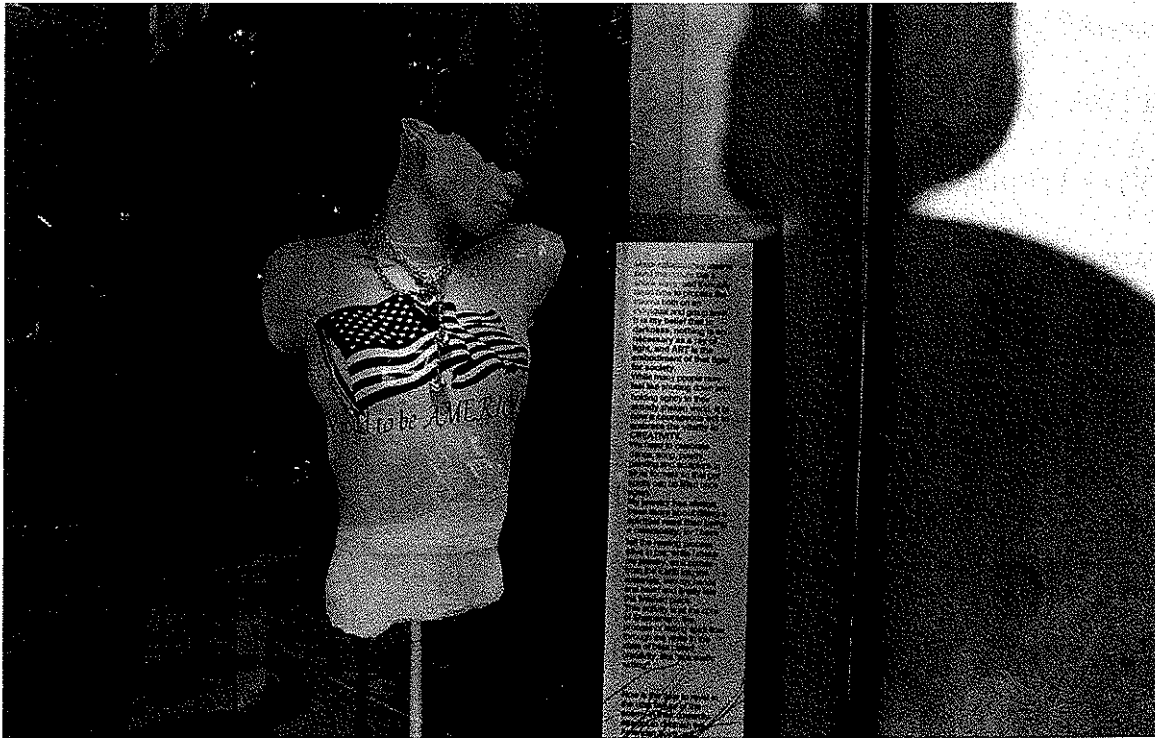
Fig. 3. A National 9/11 Memorial rendering made by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation in 2004, showing One World Trade Center and *Reflecting Absence*. Courtesy of the LDMC.

heralded as something “new” and transcendent. Indeed, its towering height, elegant steel-and-glass façade and nearly impenetrable construction will turn it into a realized spectacle of the urban ideal. What most don’t realize is One World Trade Center’s similarity to other 9/11 commemorative gestures, due to its adherence to familiar, pre-existing criterion and modes of expression. Early planning for the site began to coalesce only months after the attacks, signaling the same municipal compulsion to designate meaning and launch commemoration as Bush’s first 9/11 statement. Daniel Libeskind’s vision for the “Freedom Tower” and the surrounding complex were reportedly inspired by the architect’s first sighting of the Statue of Liberty, during his immigration to the United States; the anecdote recalls the same references to divine inspiration as Congress’ spontaneous chorus on the steps of the Capitol Building on the evening of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Perhaps most importantly, One World Trade Center has been marked as a fortified beacon of a new era, somehow shifting the paradigm of a city’s civil operations while being coated in what David Simpson rightly calls the “coercive and inevitably pastiche coinages”<sup>51</sup> invented by Daniel Libeskind, Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani. Surely, the tower boasts superlative statistics, but its reach upwards and its supposed immense commercial potential places it within our familiar fixation with expressing largesse and reaffirming our own capitalist potency. Such is the general mission of the skyscraper.

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51. David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 63.





Nathan Lyons, from *After 9/11*. © Yale University Art Gallery, 2003.

### Chapter 3

#### Production and Consumption: American Flags and Commemorative Kitsch

While the federal government, state governments, smaller communities and appointed “commissions” and committees were orchestrating very public memorials to 9/11, independent gestures were also being made with equal fervor. Like the “official” commemorative practices spanning the last ten years, they too have drawn upon a limited vocabulary with the purpose of reaffirming America’s perceived strength and righteousness. The small assortment of patriotic images and phrases that have been employed are intensely familiar, and had already been well established as American motifs before September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Just like the bagpipes and granite cenotaphs mentioned earlier, they exist as pre-associated,

accessible symbols to everyone whom the media permits to see them. Additionally, their familiarity aids 9/11's superficial integration into America's larger historical narrative. Waving flags and buying t-shirts and slapping patriotic decals on the back of one's truck are simply contemporary incarnations of our culture's immoderate tendency to memorialize events through individualistic expression and remedial consumerism. To say that other cultures do not mourn tragedies by distributing flowers, tokens, and teddy bears, and by waving flags would of course be incorrect. However, the sheer quantity of these gestures after 9/11 indicates how compatible these practices have become with America's consumer culture, and the "central role" it plays in "shaping citizenship and national identity," as Marita Sturken writes in *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*.<sup>52</sup> In her text, Sturken locates the development of private commemorative culture in the United States within the post-World War II period, when a "national sense of triumph" managed to "subsume any mourning of the dead into a nationalist narrative that continued through the affirmation of American consumerism in the postwar years of cold war politics." She also explores the socio-historical origins of this country's "unprecedented national focus on cultural memory and nationally sanctioned remembrance."<sup>53</sup> Such broad contextualization exceeds the scope of this project, but her examination of how commemorative kitsch fosters "political acquiescence,

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<sup>52</sup> Maria Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. 2007 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 13.

and infantilizes citizens while promoting the United State's "innocence"<sup>54</sup> will prove useful in illuminating the nationalist coding of these objects and images.

Ultimately, the purchase and display of 9/11 commemorative objects has become the primary method for citizens to express American nationalism. This relationship, and its limited lexicon of imagery, has been firmly established for decades. What becomes central to the commemoration of 9/11 is the resulting high level of familiarity associated with the various objects, images, and phrases—combined methods that have been used for decades, if not longer, to signify patriotism and mourning. Therefore, the use of the American flag, teddy bears, commemorative coins, and age-old cries of "*These colors don't run!*" and "*United we stand,*" has turned these consumerist rituals into very conscious references to this commemorative tradition. Like the reenactment of traditional military ceremonies, replete with bagpipes and gun salutes, virtually every banner, key chain, and shrine to the victims of 9/11 is designed and consumed with the intention of placing the catastrophe alongside our other fables of American heroism. As Adrian Parr claims in *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory, and the Politics of Trauma*, the well-established "industry of memorial culture," has become primarily "semiological."<sup>55</sup> A crucial distinction is that the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> have also consistently been portrayed as America's most important moment—our long-awaited climax in a supposed fight for liberty and justice against any number of heretic foes. From this position a

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54. Ibid, 25.

55. Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory, and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 168.

new, alleged era of exception intersects with a habituated vocabulary for expressing our own significance.

"I came in from [John F.] Kennedy [International Airport] to find American flags flying all over the Upper East Side," wrote author Joan Didion in 2002.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, among the many methods for Americans to express solidarity with victims and country after the attacks, displaying the American flag was undeniably the most rampant. It was also the most instantaneous; a *New York Times* article revealed that Wal-Mart had sold 366,000 flags nationwide in the two days after September 11<sup>th</sup>—roughly 2000% more than the same dates the previous year. Other flag-making companies were also reportedly swamped with business; between making small, portable and plastic flags to larger, hanging versions, the Annin & Company flag factory "tripled production" as its employees "gained a different perspective on their work." The factory's manager is quoted, describing the facility's hectic new schedule as a "wartime atmosphere" and recalling his father's similar experience making fighter planes in a General Motors plant after Pearl Harbor.<sup>57</sup> An update by the Times in March of 2002 confirms that September 11<sup>th</sup> indeed provoked the company's largest surge in demand for American flags, at least in company president Joe LaPaglia's "35-year career."<sup>58</sup> Buying and purchasing flags has remained popular in the past ten years, with perennial surges on the anniversaries of 9/11 in observance of Patriot

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56. Joan Didion, "Fixed Opinions, on the Hinge of History." *Vintage Didion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 176.

57. Julian E. Barnes, "A Nation Challenged: Proud Spirits; As Demand Soars, Flag Makers Help Bolster Nation's Morale," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), September 23, 2001.

58. Aaron Donovan, "Update: Annin & Company; 13 Stripes 50 Stars, 800 Tired Workers," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 10, 2002.

Day. The tenth anniversary in 2011, predictably, provoked a particularly large swell. As Sturken points out, the “consumption of flags” is doubly powerful, as it “signal[s] the...promotion not simply of patriotism but of consumerism.”<sup>59</sup> Their display has become inextricably linked with collective recovery and political unity.

Among the most prominent displays of the flag were at sports games; from September 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, enormous American flags covered the entire playing field before game play at each National Football League game—the days surrounding the anniversary also happened to be opening weekend for the sport. Major League Baseball teams who played on the anniversary were required by the organization to wear special commemorative caps, which were identical but for a small American flag stitched into the sides. Amidst wide coverage and controversy, the New York Mets attempted to wear the special caps that they adorned during their first game after the 9/11 attacks, which honored the FDNY and NYPD, but were denied the right by MLB commissioners.<sup>60</sup> The sports organization’s desire to standardize their memorial gesture on the anniversary isn’t surprising, or questionable—but it does speak to the special power of one, repeated image, displayed unanimously. This unanimity that the American flag represents for all its bearers is quite central to its purpose. Sturken sees common, reproducible symbols and objects as “not only embodying a particular kind of

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59. Maria Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. 2007 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 57.

60. Adam Rubin, “Mets can’t wear NYPD, FDNY hats,” *ESPN*, September 12, 2011, [http://espn.go.com/new-york/mlb/story/\\_/id/6958670/new-york-mets-wear-nypd-fdny-hats-9-11-game](http://espn.go.com/new-york/mlb/story/_/id/6958670/new-york-mets-wear-nypd-fdny-hats-9-11-game)



prepackaged sentiment, but as conveying the message that this sentiment is one that is universally shared.”<sup>61</sup> Not only does this simplify the experience or “political complexity”<sup>62</sup> of an event, but it also contributes to the enhanced glorification of the object or image. A popular tale in the days after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 involves three firefighters raising a flag at Ground Zero, a spectacle that was first photographed for *The Record*, a New Jersey newspaper, and subsequently circulated due to its likeness to the related Iwo Jima stunt. In the image, the firefighters stand around a crooked flagpole as two of them cooperate in hoisting the flag to the top of pole. All three of them cock their heads upward, looking at the flag just above their head, and the postures are reminiscent of the Medieval proclivity for painting figures with gazes turned upwards, looking towards the heavens. Some aesthetic hierarchies of space have remained intact, and the elevation of the flag in this photograph—and in general use—indubitably grants it sanctity. Despite combining efforts with the City of New York, the alleged former owner of the now famous, flag in the photo has failed to locate it, and has now set up an elaborate website devoted to its retrieval.<sup>63</sup>

The fetishization of the flag continued to germinate after 9/11. In April of 2002, the *New York Times* wrote a profile of a Sotheby’s auction of 90 historic American flags. Formerly belonging to a retired business executive and avid

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61. Maria Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. 2007 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 22.

62. Ibid.

63. Shirley Dreifus, “Help Find the Flag,” last accessed 2/15/12, <http://findthe911flag.com/>.

collector, the flags were set to comprise Sotheby's "largest flag auction ever."<sup>64</sup> Elaborating on the apparent "high volume of calls about the sales," the article quotes the auction house's folk art director attributing the attention to "the growing popularity of flags as collectibles," which is "partly the result of patriotic fervor generated by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>."<sup>65</sup> The majority of these flags corresponded historically with the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, and yet their recently inflated value as cultural emblems has also directly increased their monetary value. It is a perfect example of the way 9/11 superimposed new meaning upon preexistent, pre-valued symbols in order to insert itself in the historical order *and* create a refreshed market of capitalism. It also reveals how cultural capital and economic capital have become virtually seamless. "Experts" predicted flags in the auction would sell for as much as \$50,000.<sup>66</sup>

While American flags have filtered into the "high" tiers of our culture, they have also permeated the "low" with even greater magnitude. Embodied in a shockingly wide assortment of commemorative objects—that almost invariably remain well within the parameters of "kitsch,"—the stars and stripes have become the clearest mark of solidarity after 9/11. Without the decoration of the flag, consumer items remain unabashed commodities, only meant for functional use and profit. Alternately, the flag's presence transforms products into higher symbols of belief and allegiance. Given their symbolic superiority, it's curious that the American flag is emblazoned upon so many functional items; their

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64. Kate Murphy, "Arts in America: Down from the Flagpole, Up in the Museum Gallery," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 9, 2002.

65. *Ibid.*

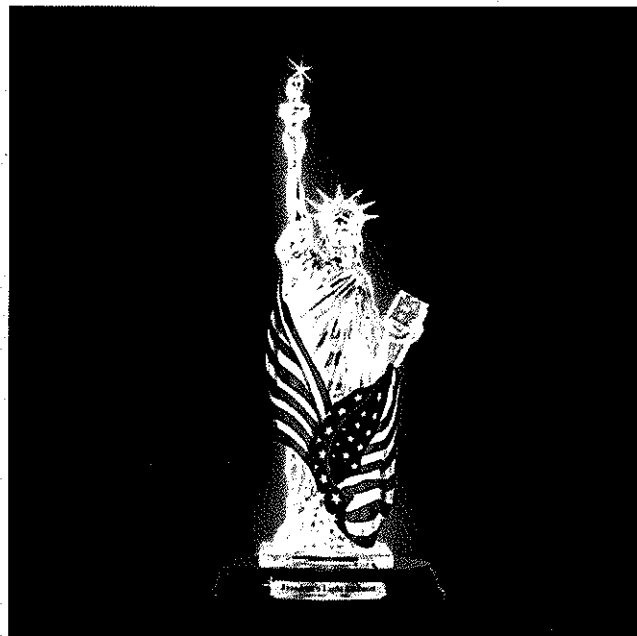
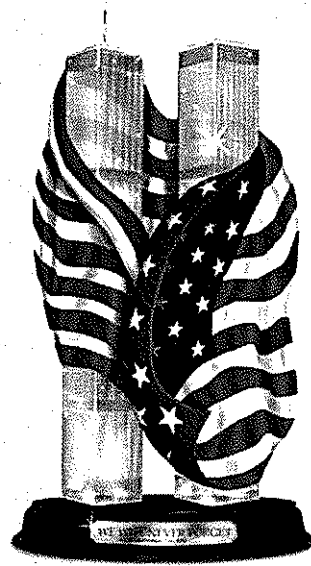
66. *Ibid.*

signification of, above all, a commitment to a set of values must defy assumptions that businesses and corporations only have money in mind. One can only assume that this strategy is effective, and the addition of an American flag is immensely profitable. In its online store, Wal-Mart currently sells an extensive selection of products that capitalize on Old Glory: in additions to actual flags in five different sizes, items include an "Old Fashioned American Flag Mouse Pad," and "American Flag Dog Sweater," a "Travel American Flag Mug," an "American Flag Dog Bed," and an "American Flag Humingbird Feeder." All items support the exact purpose and function as their counterparts that lack the decoration of the stars and stripes. Marita Sturken makes an important point that before 9/11, it was easy to witness "ironic commentary on the flag, which has a long history in American art and popular culture" until it went "under siege" following the attacks. She concludes, "an ironic engagement with the flag is impossible in this climate, [as] the flag itself has taken on new dimensions of kitsch."<sup>67</sup>

Just as it occupied entire football fields and upper-tier art auctions, the American flag has clearly had an enormous presence within the market of low-level consumer products and commemorative tokens in the years following 9/11. While the former indicates the flag's high value as a symbol *and* historical object, how does its coexistence within the latter category of cheap, accessible and tacky items not negate this worth? As Clement Greenberg writes in his famous essay,

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67. Maria Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. 2007 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 57.



Figs. 4.1. and 4.2. The “World Trade Center Tribute Towers” and “Freedom’s Light Endures” comprise the Bradford Exchange’s “We Will Never Forget Sculpture Collection,” released in 2011. Each figure is currently priced at \$99.96.

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in a "stable society that functions well enough to hold in solution the contradictions between its classes, [this] cultural dichotomy becomes somewhat blurred."<sup>68</sup> As long as the "lower" objects somewhat consciously *imitate* the formal qualities or duties of higher art forms, the value of the employed symbol remains intact. "Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations," Greenberg declares. "[It] changes according to style, but remains always the same" (p. 10). This criteria still defines the aspirations and limitations of kitsch, and can easily be applied to the various teddy bears, t-shirts, snow globes, commemorative coins, and other trinkets devoted to celebrating patriotism and memorializing 9/11. Though American flags remain the most prevalent symbol and demonstration of kitsch's appropriative tendency, the examination of commemorative kitsch should also include the expanded network of 9/11 symbols as well.

For the tenth anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the online store of the collectibles merchant The Bradford Exchange released a pair of collectible, commemorative statues called the "We Will Never Forget Sculpture Collection" (Figs. 4.1, 4.2). Listed at \$99.96 USD—or four installments of \$24.99—the collection included one rendering of the Twin Towers, reputedly "hand-crafted" and made of "artists' resin."<sup>69</sup> The towers are gloriously cloaked by a cloth American flag that ripples, as the result of some imaginary wind, and hangs over the top edge of the North Tower as its other edge swoops downward to hang just

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68. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 14.

69. "Patriotic Sculptures Honor Anniversary of 9/11," *The Bradford Exchange Online*, [http://www.bradfordexchange.com/products/917538\\_september-11-sculpture-collection.html](http://www.bradfordexchange.com/products/917538_september-11-sculpture-collection.html).

above the surface of the sculpture's hard-plastic base. The second sculpture features the Statue of Liberty in a nearly identical arrangement. Both can be illuminated in shifting hues of red, white and blue at only "the flick of a switch," and come with non-specified "Certificates of Authenticity."<sup>70</sup> In many ways, these objects embody the aesthetic and rhetorical aspirations of all 9/11 commemorative kitsch produced in the last ten years. The dramatically draped flag, the three-color lights and the "silver-finish title plaque" that reads—predictably—"We Will Never Forget," bleed with the "sentimental excess" that Marita Sturken says defines contemporary American consumer values.<sup>71</sup> And yet, it also strains to signify high quality and craftsmanship, which, in its careful deliberation, signifies a purity of intentions and *authenticity*. Authenticity in the product description's own usage must denote its officialdom as a culturally sanctioned mode of remembrance, and the statue's status as an original work of art. However, the plastic statues remain, almost proudly, well within the bounds of kitsch as products that use antiquated signifiers of extravagance and class. The company's own language reveals its semi-conscious squaring between high-ticket and spin-off: the product description boasts that the flag on each statue is made of "real fabric;" the figurines are rendered with "artists' resin;"<sup>72</sup> and the optional staggered payments recall informercials and clearly cater to people with limited disposable income. The manufacturer's—and customer's—own awareness of

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70. Ibid.

71. Maria Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. 2007 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.

72. "Patriotic Sculptures Honor Anniversary of 9/11," *The Bradford Exchange Online*, last accessed 2/17/12, [http://www.bradfordexchange.com/products/917538\\_september-11-sculpture-collection.html](http://www.bradfordexchange.com/products/917538_september-11-sculpture-collection.html).

their active engagement of kitsch applies to virtually every 9/11, consumer object. The aesthetic has become central to personal, patriotic expression, and therefore has become recapitulated as the most authentic form. For months after the attacks, small shrines to victims lined the streets of Manhattan, containing signs, candles, teddy bears, dolls, and other small, cheap trinkets. Commenting on the Museum of the City of New York's plan to collect an assortment of these objects for archiving, the museum director Robert Macdonald told a reporter from the *Daily News*, "This is not fine art—this is not Monet. But it's ephemera. It's real. It's history."<sup>73</sup> Managing to keep commemorative gestures affordable and modest is not what should be criticized; instead, it is the employment of formulaic, kitsch-y consumer objects that Americans use to express their response to a catastrophe that deserves scrutiny.

While buying and displaying commemorative kitsch has become the default, and most "natural" method for individuals to express solidarity, some have indeed seen it as perilously reductionist. "As if overnight, the irreconcilable event had been made manageable," Joan Didion writes, "[and] reduced to the sentimental, to protective talismans, totems, garlands of garlic, repeated pieties that would come to seem in some ways as destructive as the event itself."<sup>74</sup> The simplistic, imperative demeanor of these objects certainly works to ease the digestion of an incomprehensible event by an exceptionalist nation. Hal Foster

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73. Dennis Hamill, "Home for the Memories: City Museum's New Mission is to Preserve our Days of Horror & Heroism," *The New York Daily News*, (New York, NY), October 14 2001.

74. Joan Didion, "Fixed Opinions, on the Hinge of History." *Vintage Didion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 176-177.

elaborates: "In part, the blackmail that produces our categorical agreement operates through its tokens."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the deliberate use of kitsch to commemorate 9/11 is a conscious reference to its pre-established status as an essential American memorial practice. Teddy bears, snow globes, and other collectibles have also been made for the Oklahoma City bombings, Pearl Harbor, and, as Sturken points out, virtually every tourist destination in the United States. This rampant tendency has turned our production of collective memory into a "semi-autonomous force," claims Adrian Parr, and "one that reduces trauma to an object of reification [or] entertainment value" (p. 174).<sup>76</sup>

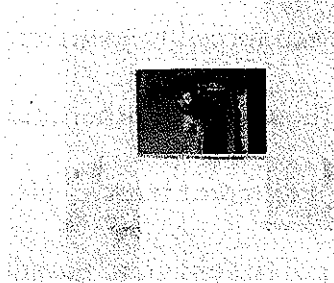
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75. Hal Foster, "Yellow Ribbons." *London Review of Books* 27, no 3 (2005), 29.

76. Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory, and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 174.







#### **Chapter 4**

##### **The “Course” of the Towers in 9/11 Imagery**

The first figurine in the “We Will Never Forget Sculpture Collection” also testifies to the undying preoccupation with the Twin Towers over the past ten years. This preoccupation, while stamped and sculpted into many commemorative consumer products, has been multiplied infinitely more times within the ephemeral currents of the news media and the Internet. “Although I believed at the time that what I had witnessed would be indelibly etched in my

mind,” Robert Storr writes about his experience witnessing the attacks firsthand in New York, “since then I have been forced to contend with the ways those traces are now crowded by...the thousands of other images of the same situation seen from different angles through different lenses.” He remarks that the images have eclipsed his own recollection of the event, a “paradox” that is “exponentially amplified by [the pictures’] aggregate” (p. 9). David Simpson also comments on the media’s exhaustive use of the Twin Towers’ image, labeling the attacks on the World Trade Center towers a strictly “flat-screen phenomenon,” that is “repetitively seen while it cannot be ‘imagined’” (p. 16). Didion concurs that the vision of the towers burning has constituted the “single, irreducible image” (p. 176) of 9/11 that was claimed by the nation quickly, and almost inevitably. It is reasonable to estimate that a great majority of daily newspapers in the United States placed an image of the North or South tower in flames on its front page, above the fold.<sup>77</sup> Surely, the attacks on and subsequent collapse of the World Trade Center Twin Towers were the most sensational event on September 11<sup>th</sup>, due to their dramatic location and the immense symbolism of the towers as feats of American power and economic virility. But it is important to note that there is a distinction between using an image to communicate “news” and information, and *appropriating* an image to memorialize—or recall—a particular event. Each represents an opposing glance forward and backward in time, respectively, and

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77. Max Frankel, *September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001* (Florida: The Poytner Institute, 2001). Frankel is a former executive editor at the *New York Times*, and compiled the front pages of almost 150 newspapers from around the United States and beyond in this monograph. The compilation supports this assumption; virtually every front-page photo showed the Twin Towers, burning or mid-collapse.

therefore serves a contrasting epistemological purpose. Images and content in newspapers and television broadcasts are coded as fresh, raw information being delivered from a void of distant, unknowable circumstances; they present a future for a community that cannot see itself entirely. For everyone but those New Yorkers in direct site of the Twin Towers when they were bombarded, the photographs and videos of the attacks acted as the surrogate reality, and the purest, most objective account of its horror. (Of course, the deliberate terror of these attacks greatly accounts for our fascination.) Conversely, commemorative use of Twin Towers images implies their own representation of a *past* event, and their own status as a reproduction. In the quickly-produced tribute posters, magazine articles, tribute web pages and miscellaneous, free-floating memes that surfaced after the attacks, the towers were frequently portrayed in their formerly intact state, and often complemented by any combination of the American flag, bald eagles, the Statue of Liberty, and patriotic mantras (Fig. 5). Over the past ten years, the image of the Twin Towers and its many incarnations seem to have possessed an infinite half-life by circulating across the Internet and remaining on the walls of offices, shopping malls, and homes. They deserve to be distinguished from kitsch objects, for they are not tied to commodified value; nor can they ever become as permanent or substitutive as monuments. Each one becomes an ephemeral, *Benjaminian* aura of the United States' experience on 9/11—both intangible and completely familiar, and, as Joan Didion said, “irreducible.”

While images of the Twin Towers burning covered the news media, and allegedly reflective commemorative memes focused primarily on their formerly

intact state, a third genre of 9/11 imagery was fixated on the aftermath of their destruction. Countless collections of photographs that focused upon Ground Zero and the state of New York City in the months after the attacks have been assembled into large-scale photography books and art exhibitions throughout the past ten years. Most seek to portray the atmosphere of a post-9/11 New York with a greater level of poignancy and photojournalistic devotion than images in the former two categories; the many, fairly repetitive photographs of New York streetscapes that feature victims, mourners, first responders, and general observers, all seem intent on grabbing a reading of New Yorkers' first, emotive reactions to the attack. DIY memorials and shrines, perceived as equally pure gestures, are also common subjects, as are scenes of the immense wreckage itself. Most possess formal qualities that convey their status as objective accounts of an up-close reality, unfiltered. Though, as Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the "credentials [of photography] are inbuilt," an amateurish aesthetic makes the documenting of monumental events seem "more authentic."<sup>78</sup> She claims that photos taken by amateurs or composed in "one of several familiar anti-art styles," which are, according to her, "just as serviceable," can now "compete with the best, so permissive are the standards for a memorable, eloquent picture."<sup>79</sup> Sontag's acknowledgment that preexisting modes of conveying "authenticity" and spontaneity in photographs are, by now, fairly well established tropes in photojournalism, is quite astute. Awareness of this tendency

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78. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 27.

79. Ibid.

will reveal the great extent to which “higher” realms of photography now covet the less polished, “democratic” image. As a result of these new criteria, the composition in many acclaimed 9/11 photographs is loose, and technical elements are often noticeably “off;” subjects are sometimes slightly out of focus, or a photograph is underexposed due to inadequate light. In addition, traces of emotionality typically appear subtle and unplanned—and certainly never overwrought. In 2001, Magnum Group Books published *New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers*,<sup>80</sup> featuring work of esteemed photojournalists and fine-art photographers like Bruce Gilden, Susan Meiselas and Thomas Hoepker. Most photographs center on the immediate days after the terrorist attacks in New York City, and use this deliberately amateurish technique of “flying low, artistically speaking” (Sontag, p. 27). A color photograph by Alex Webb (Fig. 5) shows a dark, evening scene of white-collar men walking along a bridge away from Manhattan, thick clouds of smoke obscuring the skyline behind them in a pinkish, fiery hue. The disheveled office workers are slightly out of focus as they march towards the left edge of the frame, unaware of the photographer’s presence. Despite their placement in the immediate foreground, these figures aren’t exactly the focal point of the photograph, being slightly blurry and unexpressive. The smoky, vivid sky is the image’s least quotidian feature, but its expanse also doesn’t seem to receive great emphasis. As a result, Webb’s

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80. Magnum Group Books, *New York September 11 by Magnum Photographers* (New York: powerhouse Books, 2001).



Fig. 5. Alex Webb's photograph of office walkers leaving Manhattan via foot on September 11, 2001. Published in *New York September 11* by *Magnum Photographers* (New York: powerhouse Books, 2001).

influence as a filter of content and meaning has been diminished, and the viewer treats the photograph as a raw, unsentimental transmitter of reality.

This raw, amateurish aesthetic also granted non-professional photographers and snapshot-taker to a level of equal authority; 9/11 photographs have hence become evaluated primarily upon their proximity to the event, and on their intrepidity. Scores of photography exhibitions and photography monographs—all cleanly within the genre of the “coffee-table book”—were assembled in the first few years after the attacks, featuring equal quantities of images taken by photographers and civilians who happened to have a point-and-shoot camera on hand. Some have great artistic merit, most have immense value as artifacts of an immensely historical situation, and the majority of images exist as redundant exercises of “knowing” the reality of 9/11. “Only a handful of images are unique to each book,” remarked a *Washington Post* staff writer, in a piece that overviewed the emergence of 9/11 coffee-table books. In sum, he called the books’ management of the tragedy “terribly proper, of the ‘we don’t talk about the dead’ tradition of polite avoidance.”<sup>81</sup> All implicitly claim to be a comprehensive authority on the atmospheric nature of New York City after the terrorist attacks. One photography exhibition that Sontag identifies as “exemplary”<sup>82</sup> of these tendencies is *Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs*,<sup>83</sup> which was a massive show erected a few weeks after September

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81. Philip Kennicott, “Bringing Death Back Into the Parlor: A New Batch of Coffee-Table Books Commemorates 9-11,” *The Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), December 16, 2001.

82. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 70.

83. *Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs*, online archive, last accessed 2/20/12, <http://hereisnewyork.org/index2.asp>.



11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, featuring over a thousand photographs taken by both professionals and amateurs. At the exhibition and on its current, expansive online catalogue, the author of each photograph is not disclosed, despite the inclusion of work by many prolific photographers. The high volume of photographs along with the cancellation of their authorship demonstrates how *Here is New York's* privileges “reality” over artistic manipulation or notoriety. It is a worthy pursuit, and a stirring, effective show, but it does ultimately cater to the belief that 9/11 can be conveyed through an “objective” presentation of photography—and photography almost all well within the borders of a particular genre.

Countless other coffee-table books and art exhibitions capitalize on their ostensible ability to provide new and absolute awareness of 9/11. Among the collection are the monographs *Above Hallowed Ground: A Photographic Record of 9/11*, assembled by NYPD photographers,<sup>84</sup> *Pilgrimage: Looking at Ground Zero* by a Vermont photographer named Kevin Bubriski,<sup>85</sup> and the colossal *Aftermath*, which features acclaimed photographer Joel Meyerowitz's enormous photographs of the wreckage at Ground Zero.<sup>86</sup> His images are much more composed, steady, and authoritative; but their mission is still to document an un-distilled reality. In addition to *Here is New York*, other photography exhibitions focusing on the aftermath of 9/11 include *The September 11 Photo Project*,<sup>87</sup> which displayed amateur photographs of the small shrines and memorials scattered across New

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84. Photographers of the New York City Police Department, Christopher Sweet, David Fitzpatrick, Gregor Demendinger. *Above Hallowed Ground: A Photographic Record of 9/11* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).

85. Kevin Bubriski, *Pilgrimage: Looking at Ground Zero* (New York: powerHouse Books, 2002).

86. Joel Meyerowitz, *Aftermath* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2006).

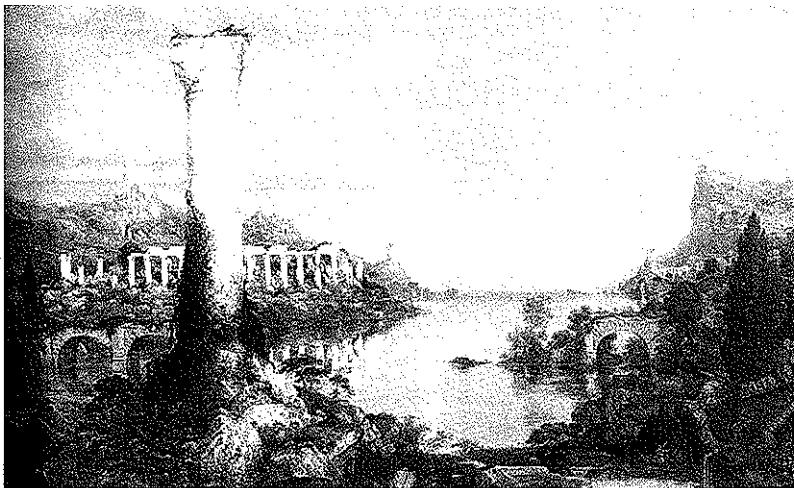
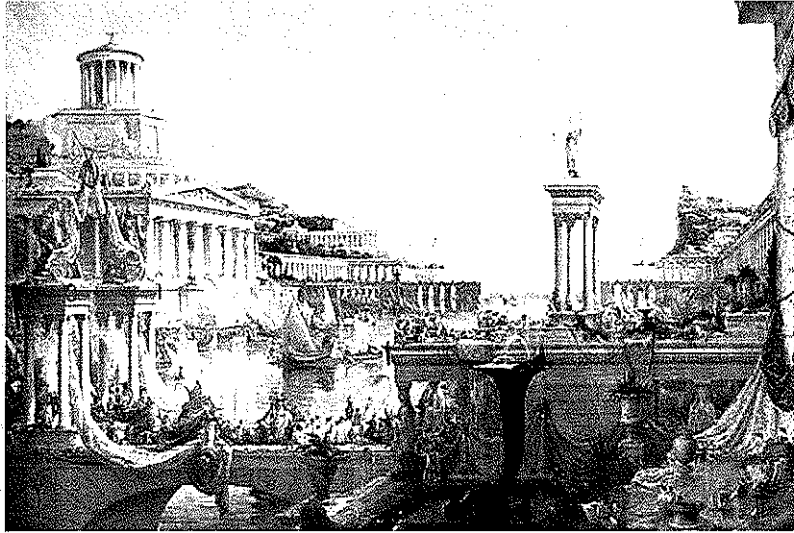
87. *The September 11 Photo Project*, online archive, last accessed 2/25/11,  
<http://www.sep11photo.org/html/home.html>

York, later compiling them into a book, and the Brooklyn Museum's *Looking Back From Ground Zero*,<sup>88</sup> a curated exhibit of photographs that commemorated the fifth-year anniversary of the attacks with a broad span of images of lower Manhattan before *and* after the attacks. Formal sophistication is consistently exchanged for an "anti-art" approach, which ideally yields "pure," documentary images of New York's—and more broadly, our country's—physical and emotional condition after 9/11.

Generally, these genres of new 9/11 icons—commemorative memes, news photographs and photojournalistic compilations—each depict a distinct phase of the World Trade Center, which has become even more of an extremely potent and multitudinous symbol of American ideology, following the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The three genres have focused upon, respectively: the Twin Towers' formerly intact state as two glorious monuments, standing prominently in the New York City skyline; their subsequent destruction in an inferno of fire and terror; and the enduring aftermath of their effacement. News media images were indubitably created and circulated most quickly after the terrorist attacks,

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88. "Looking Back From Ground Zero: Images from the Brooklyn Museum Collection," *The Brooklyn Museum*, last accessed 2/25/11, [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/ground\\_zero/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/ground_zero/)



Figs. 5.1-5.3. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire* (5.1); *Destruction* (5.2); *Desolation* (5.3), oil on canvas, 1868. The New York Historical Society,

but otherwise there is no discernible timeline. And yet, the summation of these three components of 9/11 imagery produces a discernible narrative of the Twin Towers' lifespan. It is a familiar arc, and one that curiously mimics the rise and fall of human civilization in Thomas Cole's famous series of paintings, *The Course of Empire* (figs. 5.1-5.3). The third painting in the five-part series, *The Consummation of Empire*, depicts a flourishing city with towering, Classical monuments and lavish festivities; the subsequent painting, *Destruction*, shows the same city afflicted by a violent storm as structures crumble and malevolent armies slay citizens. *Desolation* is the fifth and last painting, in which Cole has removed all traces of human life, instead displaying a tranquil scene in which monuments have crumbled and lush vegetation gradually reclaims the site. Despite its criticism of the dangers of human—or American, as has been claimed—zeal, the series invests hope in the process of renewal, suggesting that even social anomie and unfathomable tragedy are components of a greater societal cycle. Just as the infamous image of soldiers raising an American flag at Iwo Jima contributed to the popularity of the similar photograph of firefighters hoisting the flag at Ground Zero, mythological narratives like *The Course of Empire* seem to have subconsciously informed our culture's fixation upon the sight of our own operatic rise and fall—and, as our nation imagines, the creation of a new era. Through experiencing of images of the Twin Towers in these three states, each state can each be witnessed, felt, and truly "known" as they are simultaneously relegated to a removed, manageable realm.





©Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photos

## Chapter 5

### Ten Years Later: Parody and Critical Detachment

In the first few years after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, honoring the tragedy of the attacks by participating in commemorative practices or making patriotic gestures became nearly universal, unquestionable activities. Both were swift reflexes for the federal government, and immensely relevant duties for the news media and other television programming; American citizens and smaller communities accepted this new project of engaging with the nation—and its accompanying dogma—renewed, as street companies and large manufacturers alike sold massive quantities of American flags and memorial consumer objects. These parallel processes of commemoration were, of course, most rampant in 2001 and 2002, and declined at predictable rates until their perennial resurgences

on each anniversary. Perhaps due to our society's penchant for partitioning cultural eras into decades, the tenth anniversary this past year garnered the most attention since 2001, with countless public ceremonies and events, including the unveiling of the National 9/11 Memorial. In the weeks before and after the anniversary, news media dutifully indexed community programming and produced its own memorial content. Commentary percolated across Internet blogs and forums as the same, aforementioned genres of photos and images re-circulated. 9/11 became a compulsory event for all Americans to participate in—or at least witness—again. In 2001, the terrorist attacks and our corresponding rituals of remembrance seemed untouchable, and unfit for scrutiny or humor; it became heralded as the event that would end America's alleged bias towards ironic detachment and criticism. 9/11 remained a delicate subject in the subsequent years, more or less avoided in mainstream critique, and never parodied. However, despite comparable volumes of patriotic effluence on the tenth anniversary of the attacks, this year has witnessed the gradual integration of 9/11 into our vast collection of lampoon-able subjects. Perhaps the assassination of Osama Bin Laden brought sufficient closure, or the decadal unit also implicitly signaled the end of the commemorative era; maybe there is simply a threshold for how many times motifs can be employed before they become too familiar, and anachronistic. Any combination of the three seems plausible, and seems to possess the power to beckon new interpretations and portrayals of an event that has been guarded as sacred for so long.

Illuminating the harsh resolve with which 9/11 was protected in earlier years, Joan Didion noted there was an “open season” on Susan Sontag for her comment in *The New Yorker* magazine’s well-executed and discerning issue on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001.<sup>89</sup> In the brief editorial, Sontag criticized the “unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators,” and declared, “Everything is not OK.”<sup>90</sup> As Didion points out, Sontag was “accused of ‘unusual stupidity’ [and] of ‘moral vacuity’”<sup>91</sup> by a writer at *The Weekly Standard*. In addition, Edward Rothstein for the *New York Times* used the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> to refute the moral relativism and purportedly anti-Western predilections of post-modern and post-colonial discourse, condemning columnists at *The Nation* and *The Guardian* who acknowledged historical contexts and Western injustices before 9/11 for their “anti-Western virulence” and “weakening of judgment against terrorism.”<sup>92</sup> Two days later, in an article for *Time Magazine*, Roger Rosenblatt declared the “end of irony,” also prompted by the terrorist attacks and a solid rebuttal to “the good folks in charge of America’s intellectual life” who “have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously.”<sup>93</sup> Almost all comedy programming and entertainment categorically avoided involving 9/11 in their frequently topical

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89. Joan Didion, “Fixed Opinions, Or the Hinge of History,” in *Vintage Didion* (New York: Vintage Books), 179.

90. Susan Sontag, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta\\_talk\\_wtc](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta_talk_wtc).

91. Joan Didion, “Fixed Opinions, Or the Hinge of History,” in *Vintage Didion* (New York: Vintage Books), 179.

92. Edward Rothstein, “Attacks on U.S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/arts/22CONN.html?scp=1&sq=pomo%20poco&st=cse&pagewanted=1>.

93. Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End,” *Time Magazine*, September 24, 2001, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000893,00.html>.



and edgy routines, preferring instead to break the comedic barrier and acknowledge the attacks solemnly. At the beginning of *The Daily Show's* first episode after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, host Jon Stewart spoke earnestly about the gravity of the attacks to a silent studio, approaching tears as he called this obligation a "privilege," and introduced the show as an episode full of unrelated, *amusing* clips that "might make you chuckle."<sup>94</sup> Dave Letterman also debuted the *Late Show's* first post-9/11 episode with a solemn monologue, as did most entertainment programming.

Approximately ten years later, on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011, *The Daily Show* included in its standard, satiric program a "preview" of a special (and fake) episode, ostensibly to be aired the following day. The feature was, as the clip revealed, titled *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart Remembers 9/13/2001: Remembering the Day We Forgot the Lessons of the Day We Had Sworn We Would Always Remember*,<sup>95</sup> and its preview mimicked the melodramatic format of 9/11 memorial television programming by reflecting on a new tragedy: the trite, excessive patterns of commemoration and the way they contradict a much more hostile American reality. The ensuing montage provides clips of actual newscasters and commentators espousing anti-Muslim, anti-gay and other intolerant sentiments interspersed with fake testimonials of *Daily Show* actors reflecting on the horror of our new predicament. "We watched as the tragic

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94. Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, television, (September 20, 2001; New York: Comedy Central), <http://www.comedycentralinsider.com>.

95. Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, television (September 14, 2011; New York: Comedy Central), <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-september-12-2011/coming-soon—the-daily-show-remembers-9-13-2001>.

images,” Jon Stewart narrates over footage of the wreckage at Ground Zero, in a falsely grave tone, “became the wallpaper for every 9/11-related story.” Another cast member grimly delivers a testimonial: “I will never forget September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006,” he remarks, “I turned on the TV and saw a plane hit a building. By the time I realized it was just MSNBC re-airing their original 9/11 coverage, it was too late; I had already shit my pants.”<sup>96</sup> The narrow aesthetic guidelines for 9/11 memorial media bits are mimicked uncannily; soft piano music plays throughout the montage, and a semi-translucent flag waves across a skyline between clips. This spoof proves—and hinges upon—the tired familiarity of these motifs, ten years later, and it unabashedly celebrates the shift into a more relaxed phase of awareness. Just as 9/11 commemorative practices appropriated well-known, preexisting symbols and traditions, cultural commentary may now employ the 9/11 lexicon referentially. Questions of what this overwrought vocabulary of Twin-Towers images, 9/11 mantras, and memorabilia has the power to suggest, once it becomes a reference removed from its original context, are still being explored.

In January of 2011, the young, unrepresented and self-proclaimed “pixel artist” Anthony Michael Sneed had his first exhibition, titled *Hell for Hire* at a small, boutique art gallery on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Among the works he exhibited was a painting, *Before & After*,<sup>97</sup> which depicts the New York City skyline, within which the North Tower of the World Trade Center is ablaze

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96. Ibid.

97. Anthony Michael Sneed, *Before & After*, oil on canvas, 2011.

and wafting smoke while a jet approaches the South Tower (Fig. 6). The painting is noteworthy for its pixelated appearance; the style references 8-bit videogame graphics of the 1990s, and becomes an implicit comment on an icon's loss of complex meaning beyond its own easy recognition. In a contemporary discussion of this phenomenon—Andy Warhol and other Pop Art explorers certainly engaged it first—Sneed's choice to illustrate the Twin Towers burning identifies it as the most emblematic image of our time. The fact that a brightly colored, videogame realization of the attack on the Twin Towers so easily avoids trivializing the actual tragedy of the event indicates how the overuse of an image can strip it of any former, tangible associations.

In 2011, satirical usages of the Twin Towers image also circulated briefly throughout certain realms of the Internet. Online communities designed for sharing images, videos, and other information—like 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr—produce and disseminate Internet memes constantly, and remain sub-cultural, furtive enclaves that perpetuate a bias towards humorous, ironic and pastiche content. They also are early generators of 9/11 parody and critique; in an 2002 essay, folklorist Bill Ellis attributes this fact to the “distancing effect of the Internet,” which “enables persons to propose and circulate jokes anonymously and with little risk of social retaliation.”<sup>98</sup> In the summer of 2011—and perhaps earlier, as memes become more and more difficult to trace—a collage image emerged on an image-aggregate blog on Tumblr, which rapidly was added to

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98. Bill Ellis, “Making a Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing A Global Response to Disaster,” *New Directions in Folklore*, Issue 6 Chapter 1, last accessed 2/29/12, <http://www.temple.edu/english/newfolk/bigapple/bigapple1.html>.

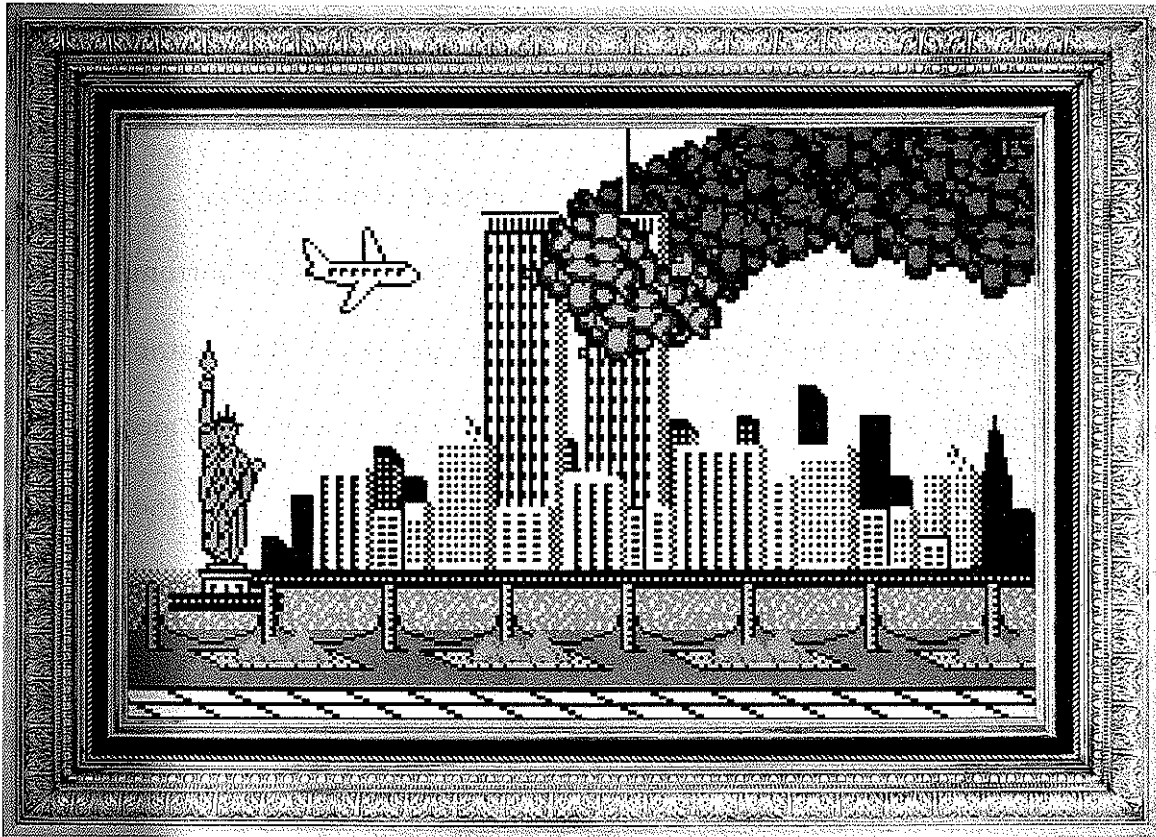


Fig. 6. Anthony Michael Sneed's painting, *Before & After*, exhibited in a 2011 show at the Brooklyn art space, ArtJail. Oil on canvas.



Fig. 6. Anthony Michael Sneed's painting, *Before & After*, exhibited in a 2011 show at the Brooklyn art space, ArtJail. Oil on canvas.

other blogs and transferred to other sites like the social networking, mainstream behemoth facebook (Fig. 7). The image uses a familiar photograph of the Manhattan skyline, pre-9/11, with a semi-translucent American flag superimposed; red, block letters spell “NEVER FORGET” in the bottom-left corner. These three elements comprise the image onto which the creator made his or her mark; placed over each Twin Tower is a can of the popular alcoholic drink Four Loko, and a crudely-painted “U” has been inserted within the word “FORGET”; the phrase now spells “NEVER FOURGET,” and the image becomes a tribute to the beverage, which is now banned in all 50 states. Just as Anthony Michael Sneed demonstrates the Twin Towers image’s supremacy as a contemporary pop image, “Never Fourget” selects 9/11 imagery as the best (and most topical) way to label something a national tragedy. The sarcastic comparison of Four Loko’s prohibition and a cataclysmic event is certainly reckless, and certainly does not aim to be understood or tolerated by all Americans—it wouldn’t be—but the meme is emblematic of a relatively new interest in lightheartedly exposing 9/11’s excessive use as a trope. However, another image that spread across the internet shows that casual appropriations of 9/11 symbols are not tolerated by everyone; a photograph of a dark-skinned man, standing in a street square in another country—rumored to be India, or Middle-Eastern—smiling and wearing a button-down shirt, printed with the image of the Twin Towers burning. One blogger on the small sports blog *Off the Record* implored, “Is this a “never forget” type of shirt?” He expresses skepticism, adding, “If the person who made this [shirt] did it in a celebratory manner of the

attacks, then they can rot in hell.”<sup>99</sup> The photograph also appears on the comic and image aggregate site, “LOLWTFCOMICS,” with nothing but the title, “Muslim With Twin Towers Shirt 9 11.”<sup>100</sup> Visitors to the site have an option of voting the photograph “Funny!” or “Not Sure if Funny.” Though the site presents the photograph with a greater level of humorous detachment, the latter option received twice as many votes. The shirt’s simplistic illustration of the Twin Towers on fire is remarkably similar to Anthony Michael Sneed’s 8-bit *Before & After*, and the shirt’s use of this sensationalized image is, ultimately, not very distinct from its more “appropriate” uses in coffee-table photography books and other commemorative reconceptualizations. The photograph can be used as an example of the complicated nature of icons, and how their inherent vapidness depends on context, or a proclaimed function, to define their meaning.

This issue gets more complicated as one explores the ongoing production of 9/11 commemorative products, which must manipulate popular patriotic imagery to embody popular values *and* create enticing consumer items. The ongoing, senseless production of these kitsch-objects escaped critique for years after the attacks, but has recently undergone scrutiny within mainstream commentary. On September 12, 2011, *Time Magazine* published an article titled, “What Did You Buy for the 9/11 Anniversary?”<sup>101</sup> which examined new—and equally questionable—methods for business owners to engage with the

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99. Micah Warren, “World Trade Center attack shirt,” *Off the Record Online*, December 22, 2011,

100. “Muslim with Twin Towers Shirt 9 11,” *LOLWTFCOMICS*, December 25, 2011.  
<http://lolwtfcomics.blogspot.com/2011/12/muslim-with-twin-towers-shirt-9-11.html>

101. Feifei Sun, “What Did You Buy For the 9/11 Anniversary?” *Time US*, September 12, 2011,  
<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2092823,00.html>

anniversary, with “products and services more meaningful than t-shirts, magnets, and other traditional memorabilia,” which the reporter claims “appear to cash in on a national tragedy.” The article then concludes that 9/11 merchandise and services should donate all profits after tax. Another, more unabashed piece published on the popular humor and culture blog Cracked.com assembled a list of “The 8 Most Shameless Attempts to Cash in on 9/11,”<sup>102</sup> which included familiar types of September 11<sup>th</sup> products, ridiculed for their exploitation of the format. One of the chosen products is “9/11 Memorial” wine, made and bottled by Lieb Cellars and sold for \$19.11, “because,” as the blogger remarks, “even getting the date right is less important than making an extra ten dollars.” He also says, of a “September 11<sup>th</sup> \$20 Coin Certificate,” that “you couldn’t push dollar bills into uselessness faster with a lighter.” These types of comments—and even these genres of parody and critique—were unthinkable in relation to 9/11 for years after the terrorist attacks. However, as select incidences and materials in 2011 suggest, the packaging and framing of 9/11 has, by virtue of its familiarity, become its own symbol—and therefore eligible for appropriation within art, parody, and critical contemplation.

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102. Luke McKinney, “The 8 Most Shameless Attempts to Cash in on 9/11,” Cracked.com, September 27, 2011, <http://www.cracked.com/blog/the-8-most-shameless-attempts-to-cash-in-911/>

## Conclusion

Though primarily operating within several discreet and insular realms of the Internet, and within entertainment media that sustains itself on satire and parody, appropriations of 9/11's most common motifs, tropes and usages for humor and irony marks the beginning of a transition into a post-9/11 era. Photoshopping other icons onto the most familiar 9/11 image, or mocking the format of overly sentimentalized portrayals of the event, are also indications of a more general leaning towards a decidedly post-modern condition, in which terminologies and meanings are deliberately built out of pre-existing symbols, so that new work and artifacts become an intricate pastiche of references. It's a curious context for the immediate explosion of 9/11 ceremonies, monuments, American flags, World Trade Center figurines, desktop background images and coffee-table books in the years after the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>; despite the many proclamations of a new era of exception, these commemorative practices also employed meta-references to known icons and tropes, with the intent of creating a new image and signaling a new era. 9/11 is certainly exceptional for the volume of attention, spectacle, and patriotic posturing that it has garnered, but an event's unsurpassed magnitude does not solely generate a different format of response. My early example of North Korea's mandatory mourning period and ceremonies of public crying after the death of Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Il was intended to embody the severest extreme of a nation's



standard process of construction history and public “realities.” The automaticity of the United States government’s response to the attacks on 9/11—the immediate, televised statements, the instatement of Patriot Day, the military ceremonies—certainly do convey that these processes also perform a function in the United States. The reduction of photographic imagery to a single icon, the construction of monolithic monuments, and the rampant display of American flags—all meant to be venerated—also suggests that mythology remains an active catalyst of state ideological forces. However, facets of American culture have also produced their own oppositional bias to singular belief, through enduring continued appreciation for individualism, humor, and cultural plurality. To track the grand trajectory of these critical apparatuses warrants a subsequent investigation, but it can be identified here as an increasingly vibrant condition of the United States—and one that will likely interact (or interfere) with larger, national projects of constructing history and belief.

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